

Motherhood for Peace: The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo

by

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Introduction

What is the importance of motherhood as a tool for peace and conflict resolution? I have conducted a case study of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo and their actions in opposing the Argentine military dictatorship that overtook the country's government from 1976 to 1983. I will focus on how their specific identities as mothers and the common goal among them allowed them to connect and enact change during such a politically violent and unstable time.

I will expand upon how the use of motherhood as a tool for peace and conflict resolution can be applied to other situations that do not directly involve mothers, use motherhood as an identity, or require mothers as leaders. Creating peace is a complicated process and perhaps some elements can be used from the case of these women organizing as mothers for building connections through various social, economic, political, or other means. Conceivably, there are some qualities or specific tactics that the Mothers have created and used to successfully enter the political arena and fight for peace that can be drawn on by others, following their example. This will be especially interesting in cases where mothers are the only ones to be responsible in times of distress, but not in times of political stability when that role is limited to men, as was the case in Argentina during this time.

Furthermore, women and concepts of gender have been left out of historical analyses until recently, and while contemporary work is more successful at including these lenses, I argue that it is still not sufficient—especially with regard to the role of maternal activism. Additionally, the role of mothers is extremely diverse and worth exploring, especially because even in such diversity, a common theme of motherhood can often work to draw individuals together, as I will explore in more depth. It is also important to consider this topic because times of conflict or other political instability often focus either solely or primarily on violence and exclude a focus

on actions made by women or others who are seeking peace. The other thing that is significant with respect to my research topic that considers the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo is that why—even though this group is so well known and widely respected by national and international audiences—are their strategies, approaches, tactics still either not respected or not used.

I begin with a brief overview of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo and Argentina's Dirty War to set the scene for my exploration of this topic. The Dirty War is the name designated to the conflict surrounding the totalitarian military regime that took over Argentina's government from 1976 to 1983 and worked to eliminate "subversives".¹ It is important to note that the name Dirty War is used to indicate that the leftist guerilla groups and the Argentine military were not on the same level in terms of violence and power, which was certainly the case as the military, over time, became significantly more violent than the leftist guerilla groups.² Overall, the early 1970s posed a difficult time for Argentina as these leftist guerilla groups were on the rise and the country was also facing high levels of unemployment and debt. Many scholars focus on how Argentina was doing well during this time in terms of infrastructure, industrialization, Westernization, education, and natural resources, and while this was certainly true, the country never achieved complete political stability which resulted in a number of issues.³

In 1973, Juan Domingo Perón, who had previously been in power as the President of Argentina and then exiled from the country after a particularly turbulent political period for the country, was re-elected. However, he died shortly after the re-election and the government was

¹ Viviana M. Abreu Hernandez, "The Mothers of La Plaza de Mayo: A Peace Movement," *Peace & Change* 27, no. 3 (2002): 394, <https://doi.org/10.1111/0149-0508.00235>.

² Marguerite Guzman Bouvard, *Revolutionizing Motherhood: The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo*, (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1994), 23.

³ Marjorie Agosin and Cola Franzen, "A Visit to the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo," *Human Rights Quarterly* 9, no. 3 (August 1987): 428, <https://doi.org/10.2307/761884>; Margaret E. Burchianti, "Building Bridges of Memory: The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo and the Cultural Politics of Maternal Memories," *History and Anthropology* 15, no. 2 (June 2004): 135, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02757200410001689954>.

taken over by his third wife and elected Vice President, Isabel Martinez de Perón, or Isabelita. This went poorly as Isabelita was not fit for the presidency and was forced to adopt several issues from previous leaders while creating new ones.⁴ Shortly after her arrival in office, the military claimed power in a so-called gentleman's coup in March of 1976. In essence, the military was in a position to take over and offered her a safe escape by stepping down as leader before they forced their power and created an especially violent scene. Overall, the military leaders were opposed to Marxism, communism, socialism, and the general democracy that most of the leftist guerilla groups were fighting for prior to the military regime. Essentially, they worked to strip citizens of their rights and did this by way of extreme violence and authoritarian rule. Social, political, and community activist efforts such as political parties, strikes, and protests were all banned, which invoked feelings of terror for those who even so much as considered opposing the military.⁵ While it was clear that high-ranking officers greatly influenced the production of war and violence through state ideology, to make matters even worse, it was difficult to tie anything back to this military government because they were not directly involved in capturing people—they used third party operations like paramilitary groups and death squads.⁶ One of the primary issues was that because a “subversive” could essentially have been anyone, some were detained or put in jail, but the majority were simply *disappeared*.⁷ Historians now estimate that the number of individuals killed rests around 30 000.⁸

⁴ Guzman Bouvard, *Revolutionizing Motherhood*, 19-46.

⁵ Abreu Hernandez, “The Mothers of La Plaza de Mayo,” 394.

⁶ Adam Scharpf, “Ideology and State Terror: How Officer Beliefs Shaped Repression during Argentina’s ‘Dirty War,’” *Journal of Peace Research* 55, no. 2 (March 1, 2018): 206, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343317748346>; Valeria Fabj, “Motherhood as Political Voice: The Rhetoric of the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo,” *Communication Studies* 44, no. 1 (March 1993): 3, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10510979309368379>.

⁷ Fabj, “Motherhood as a Political Voice,” 3.

⁸ Jo Fisher, *Mothers of the Disappeared*, (London: Zed Books Ltd, 1989), 10.

During the rule of the military, nobody in Argentina discussed the status of the government or the disappearances out of fear of being disappeared themselves, which is the context through which Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo were formed. The Mothers were an informal organization in 1977, seeking answers for the disappearance of their loved ones, mostly their missing children. The Mothers ran into each other in places like police stations or on the bus and began to talk. They found they were often met with the same stories from officials who claimed that whoever was missing must have been so because of their own actions—the military blamed the victims to avoid taking responsibility.⁹ The Mothers decided to march in protest at the Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires every Thursday afternoon, demanding answers to the loss of their loved ones.¹⁰ The Mothers selected the Plaza because it held important value as a location with significance to Argentine politics where the government house stands, and one that is in the heart of the country, but also because it provided some security by reason of its location in a public area.

The Mothers grew in numbers over the course of the military dictatorship and while they were clearly defying the military's ban on protesting, as many historians have noted, this was permitted because of their status as women and mothers even though, or as will be explored, perhaps as a direct result of the assumption that they held no political power.¹¹ However, this is not to say that there was no pushback from the military as some officials did eventually resort to force and killed the leader of the Mothers, Azucena Villaflor de Vincenti, alongside other members, Mary Ponce de Bianco and Esther Ballestrino de Careaga, while they tortured, beat, and detained several Mothers. The Mothers eventually gained international attention for their

⁹ Agosin and Franzen, "A Visit to the Mothers," 429.

¹⁰ Fabj, "Motherhood as a Political Voice," 6.

¹¹ Agosin and Franzen, "A Visit to the Mothers," 430.

actions, and they became known internationally during the 1978 World Cup in Buenos Aires as they used the increased media coverage to spread their story.¹² Eventually the military was forced to give up power, primarily due to the Islas Malvinas (Falkland Islands) War, between Argentina and Britain, which weakened the power of the military. Though, many scholars point out that the loss of military power was about more than this war but was threatened by various political parties, trade unions, and protests that re-emerged in strength across the country.¹³ Overall, there is no doubt that the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo impacted the state of Argentine political and social stability and how maternal politics were viewed on a global scale.

It is important to consider why the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo are still relevant to the disciplines of history and political science. There are consistently new scholars taking up the work of the Mothers and they are constantly drawn on for various arguments about motherhood, peace, or for support in similar human rights cases. As a leading scholar of the field, Marjorie Agosin noted in 1987 that “when the mothers are not in the plaza, they are still attending other gatherings, always fighting, learning, reflecting. They have learned to channel their anxiety and grief into constructive paths and to invent new political strategies,”¹⁴ which indicates that they are still active, aiding others, and paving the way for the fight for human rights. It also indicates how scholars can draw on them as an example of sustainable conflict resolution and an example of maternal activism that was successful at quelling violence. Some of this continued relevance of the group could also be due to the success of their nonviolence and the success they had in inspiring other groups to use nonviolence,¹⁵ especially because nonviolence can be more significant and accomplish more than other measures because it allows individuals of all ages,

¹² Fabj, “Motherhood as a Political Voice,” 11; Agosin and Franzen, “A Visit to the Mothers,” 432.

¹³ Fisher, *Mothers of the Disappeared*, 109-126.

¹⁴ Agosin and Franzen, “A Visit to the Mothers,” 433.

¹⁵ Abreu Hernandez, “The Mothers of La Plaza de Mayo,” 386.

social and economic backgrounds, or geographical locations to be involved.¹⁶ This adherence to a nonviolent approach is one of the elements of the organization that will prove most relevant for my analysis in the coming chapters.

The concerns of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo are still heard and tied into other social movements in Argentina, which also demonstrates the fluidity of the movement and highlights how there is an essence of longevity that could be explored and applied to other cases, as will become evident in my exploration. This is also reflective of how things can be everchanging but at their root still the same, which is especially relevant because the effects of the Argentine military dictatorship persist. The destruction that ensued during the military regime continues because many of the disappeared were political activists, individuals fighting for social justice and human rights, even considering the sheer number of people who were killed, and the horrible conditions people faced leaves a lasting impression—especially as the government tried to leave the Dirty War in the past. In relation, some scholars look at how the Mothers have impacted other social movements in the years after the return to democracy and a lot of scholarly work has been published discussing how the Mothers mobilized and took action during the dictatorship.

Some scholars, like Margaret Burchianti, focus on the Mothers as an organization solely after the period of active dictatorship and how they have continued to positively impact activism decades later.¹⁷ Scholars like Marguerite Guzman Bouvard discuss how the Mothers are still important because there has been limited follow-up for the military's actions and they must keep the wounds of the disappearances and the military rule open until the conflict is truly resolved.¹⁸

¹⁶ Abreu Hernandez, "The Mothers of La Plaza de Mayo," 405.

¹⁷ Burchianti, "Building Bridges of Memory," 133-150.

¹⁸ Guzman Bouvard, *Revolutionizing Motherhood*, 151.

It is also important to note that, as Jo Fisher makes clear, the Mothers have taken their children's battle for education, healthcare, equal wages, and other social issues, so their efforts will continue to be a topic of importance because there remain unsolved problems in this regard across the country.¹⁹ Similarly, some scholars have focused on Argentina following the end of the dictatorship and the trials of those who were members of the Argentine military during the dictatorship. These scholars highlight how the full picture is never truly achieved because it is only focused on the elite individuals and the dictatorship, which is limiting for the scope of understanding about the Mothers and the military in the post-dictatorship context. Therefore, it is important to keep this case open because there needs to be responsibility taken for the actions of the dictatorship, something that rarely happens, especially as the continued path for justice and accountability is unclear.²⁰ Additionally, James Brennan and Mercedes Ferreyra highlight how many Argentinians are still coming to terms with the Dirty War outside of the human rights movement, indicating a need to keep discussing this history.²¹

Much of the related literature focuses on motherhood as an approach to the field of politics and creating peace. There has been a lot of work published surrounding the role of mothers traversing the private to public domain and the image of the mother for creating peace. There are also many scholars who focus on the idea of Argentina as a successful nation in terms of industrialization, Westernization, or education and the contrast between these supposedly strong virtues and the political turbulence that defined the country during this period of military regime. Some consider times outside of this period, to attempt to determine why this is and occasionally extending into how these conditions of political turmoil act as a pathway for the

¹⁹ Fisher, *Mothers of the Disappeared*.

²⁰ James P. Brennan and Mercedes Ferreyra, *Argentina's Missing Bones : Revisiting the History of the Dirty War, Violence in Latin American History: 77-88* (University of California Press, 2018), EBSCOHost.

²¹ Brennan, *Argentina's Missing Bones*, 105-115.

voices of women to be heard. While it is difficult to narrow down why this is true, the consensus for this case is that the Mothers were successful in their opposition to the Argentine military dictatorship through their identities as mothers. Women organizing as mothers is not a new topic, but this case drew national and international attention. Maternal activism will play an important role in my analysis as it has been a developing field and refers to economic, social, and political change created through the identity of individuals as mothers and it is something that scholars have been interested in addressing using the Mothers as a case study.²² Often, mothers and women viewed in the political or public sphere are assumed to be exceptions to the rule of a male-dominated sphere, but this is not the case as women have been organizing as mothers as far back as Greek antiquity, and the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo provide an excellent example for this topic.²³

There are also a number of lenses, such as some of the ones that will be explored in this essay of gender, feminism, motherhood, religion, nonviolence, and class, in addition to many others like masculinity, economics, international political relations, and more, which is perhaps part of why there is so much scholarship surrounding the topic, as it is so expansive. Significantly, most of the Mothers come from the working class, but this crucial feature of the organization has not received sustained treatment despite its importance. There were a number of other movements going on during this time in Argentina, but these were often reserved for the upper class or wealthy elites. Following the brief historiographical claims that attribute the group's success to class, I feel there is a need for the scholarship to take up more directly the question of the Mothers' social status, because their position as working-class women formed the

²² Elva F. Orozco Mendoza, "Maternal Activism," in *The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Gender and Sexuality Studies* (John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2016), 1, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118663219.wbegss725>.

²³ Orozco Mendoza, "Maternal Activism," 1.

basis of the group's bond and enabled them to develop strong interpersonal connections, facets of the movement that have yet to be explored in great detail.

The literature is continually changing, not only dependent on the lens—like gender or class—but because this event has caused such a large reaction that the Mothers continue to protest, and the organization was able to continue in different ways. As new theories and frameworks are developed, scholars turn to this as an example of motherhood, women entering the political field, and resolving conflict, with these new approaches or lenses applied. Some scholars have focused on motherhood versus feminism with regards to peace creation and the integration of the Mothers into the political field.²⁴ This is relevant to the literature because the goals of maternal activism compared to feminism are different and should not be equated, though sometimes are, in the scholarship. As will be explored, an integral part of the Mothers' organization was to maintain separation between what they were doing as mothers and what other women might do to advance the fight for equality as understood through feminism. One thing that draws the interest of various scholars is that the Mothers have a quality of trueness and honesty that is lacking in some peace efforts cases because they came together during a time of fear, indicating a truly legitimate emotional component.²⁵

The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo also became a social phenomenon in terms of activism and human rights inspiration so there is considerable literature with scholars referencing this effort and how it ties into other examples of women who have developed groups of resistance to authoritarian regimes or military dictatorships in Latin America.²⁶ There have been a few scholars who have considered where religion plays a role in the success of the Mothers,

²⁴ Danielle Poe, "Feminism and Nonviolent Activism," in *The Routledge Handbook of Pacifism and Nonviolence*: 280 (Routledge, 2018), Taylor & Francis Group.

²⁵ Poe, "Feminism and Nonviolent Activism," 277. Though others have made similar statements.

²⁶ Agosin, Marjorie, *The Mothers of Plaza de Mayo*, translated by Janice Malloy, New Jersey: Red Sea Press, 1990.

especially because there was a lack of response from the Church in comparison to other situations of political violence in Latin America. Religion did play a role, at least to some extent, in how and why the Mothers would gather, so some academics have focused on intersections of religious identity and their identity as mothers.²⁷ Religion will also prove valuable for my discussion of the identity of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo. Religions which differ from Catholicism are also frequently left out of the historiography, most prominent in this case being Judaism. Broadly, when considering uniquely how women or mothers create peace activism, or other forms of maternal activism, there is also significant scholarship from around the world.

It is important to mention the mass variety and number of sources related to the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo. Some of these include testimonies from the Mothers themselves as well as their own newspaper and interviews—most of which will appear later as I make use of some of them as primary sources to inform my later analysis. Some scholars, like Fisher, relied almost entirely on testimony to feature the Mothers' voices and provided limited input of her own. I think it is also important to note that a lot of the literature relies on testimonies, speaking with the mothers directly and relaying the emotional aspects but also how the Mothers recall the events of the day their loved one was taken. Some of the Mothers even published their own testimonies. A significant portion of the scholarship also focuses on seeing the Mothers as victims—and of course while this is true and they suffered unimaginable losses, I resist this approach because it erases their accomplishments and the image around which they based their fight. I also feel it important to note that most scholars who are writing about the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo are aware of the power that they took and recognize the immense strength and risk that comes with their efforts, so while some individuals do not credit the Mothers at all for their successes, most

²⁷ Guzman Bouvard, *Revolutionizing Motherhood*; Fabj, "Motherhood as a Political Voice."

scholars who are writing about them want to find out why motherhood as a tool for peace and the use of the maternal identity was so successful. This places much of the literature into what I would consider a more left-leaning response on the political scale.

In terms of how much scholarship exists surrounding this case, there is a large quantity of scholarly articles and books originating from all over the world. In some of these scholarly works, authors will even include elements like quotes, pictures, and poetry or writing from the Mothers.²⁸ There are also several documentaries, movies, websites, and other media platforms dedicated to the organization that demonstrate how much of an impact they have had in general. The films and documentaries also provide a good explanation of what happened while including concrete human experiences in very compelling ways that could be digested by broader audiences while touching on more delicate and personal issues.²⁹

As for the theoretical frameworks, the literature I will use is concentrated in ethic of care theory, maternal activism, maternal thinking, and transversal dialogues.³⁰ To focus more on the peace creation or conflict resolution aspect of this case, there are some academics in this field, such as Abreu Hernandez and Fabj, who think about how the differences between men and women were exaggerated as men were blamed almost solely for the violence, social unrest, or political disturbances in order to allow this identity of motherhood to be successful in demands for peace. This will be discussed in the coming sections, but the Mothers were reliant on their husbands remaining outside of the movement to protect their image and associated power. My

²⁸ Guzman Bouvard, *Revolutionizing Motherhood*.

²⁹ *The Official Story: La historia oficial*, directed by Luis, Puenzo, 1985; Cohen Film Collection.

³⁰ Robinson, Fiona, *The Ethics of Care: A Feminist Approach to Human Security*, Temple University Press, 2011, ProQuest Ebook Central; Orozco Mendoza, "Maternal Activism;" Ruddick, Sara, *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1995; Fabj, "Motherhood as a Political Voice;" Hall, Lucy B., Anna L. Weissman, and Laura J. Shepherd, eds, *Troubling Motherhood: Maternity in Global Politics*, Oxford Studies in Gender and International Relations, New York: Oxford University Press, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190939182.001.0001>.

topic also considers different ways of understanding forms of maternal activism and, relatedly, care activism and how it works to fight against essentializing women and mothers as innately peaceful. Care activism also ties into ethic of care frameworks and elements like transversalism which will be explained and applied later as these theories act as a guiding component for my arguments in both of the coming chapters. My research also depends on understanding maternal thinking, which refers to the various perspectives and “ways of thinking and acting”³¹ that arise from work of mothers, and how this might tie into the political field, specifically in terms of dealing with conflict in ways that are alternate from the traditional.

Overall, the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo has proved to be an effective case study for exploring motherhood as a tool for creating peace. Over the course of this piece, I argue that there were a specific set of circumstances that tied this group together but additionally that there is an element of the Mothers’ identity and common goal that aided them in their fight for justice against the Argentine military dictatorship. Furthermore, I argue that there are elements of group identity and goal creation that indicate there is value to be pulled from this maternal activism and organizing as mothers that can be applied to other conflict resolution situations. Finally, I highlight how there is something that needs to be explored in more depth with regards to class and religion to achieve a better understanding of the implications of this case.

³¹ Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking*, 220.

Chapter One: Maternal Identity

Introduction

This chapter focuses on the concept of maternal identity and how it played a major role in the organization of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo. This section will address why maternal identity was so important to this organization and how it allowed for the mobilization of a diverse group of individuals. This first chapter will consider the major points of motherhood and feminism, the creation and sustenance of a common identity, the role of *marianismo* and religion, and finally maternal thinking and political strategy based around this maternal identity. This chapter focuses on maternal identity as it existed during the time of the military dictatorship in Argentina from the years of 1976 to 1983. Maternal identity is often referenced in the literature surrounding this group as a way to note that the Mothers had much in common being that they were mothers and that they acted peacefully, but I suggest that it is more complex than is often addressed by scholars writing about them, especially in the early years of this scholarship. In framing maternal identity as something that was specifically curated by this group, I suggest there is a way to push the use of identity in peace efforts further to consider the need for a group identity that is in part, but not completely, innate, or natural so that the same strategy can be used by other organizations fighting for peace. This specifically designed identity emphasized certain aspects of a traditional maternal identity such as the need to care for their children, while quieting other elements such as political motivation. In this context, maternal identity refers to the characteristics the Mothers took on as a result of having children but also how they were able to craft a new collective identity built on the lived experience of caring for children, giving birth, or playing a maternal role. Maternal identity was one of the issues that undeniably connected this group of women and led to their overall success, but it must be

examined with a critical light to see how the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo created this identity with specific intentions. Common identities, especially something strong like a maternal identity, provides a path for individuals to connect, and this was certainly the case for the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, as will become evident.

This maternal identity provided the members of the group with a sense of belonging and of community based on something so central to their existence. This is exemplified clearly by Hebe de Bonafini's statement during an interview wherein she began by saying "I am a mother" before saying anything else.³² Hebe de Bonafini plays an important role in the discussion of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo as she was the president and one of the original founding members of the organization. She worked tirelessly in activist efforts throughout the period of military dictatorship and following its end expanded her reach to more general activism surrounding human rights. She was engaged in social justice efforts until her recent passing in November of 2022. One concern I would like to address is that the narrative of this case is dominated by a small number of individuals, especially de Bonafini, because some of the Mothers are most present in the primary sources. This could be for a number of reasons, things like how often each of the Mothers were interviewed, de Bonafini's role as president of the organization, the access I was able to have to each of these primary sources—especially when considering which sources were translated from Spanish into English. Nonetheless, de Bonafini is a valuable resource as a central player in the organization and as a spokesperson for all of the Mothers, at least during the military dictatorship. From this, the message and united front the Mothers were presenting becomes clear.

³² Nancy Saporta Sternbach, Zelia Brizeno, and Hebe de Bonafini, "Interview with Hebe de Bonafini: President of Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo," *Feminist Teacher* 3, no. 1 (1987): 16–21, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25700312>.

Motherhood and Feminism

Motherhood is evidently a common theme when looking at the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo and as a group, they are commonly drawn on both to highlight and to oppose feminist efforts. Some scholars have highlighted how the Mothers used feminism in terms of peace creation, as a method for their integration into the political field as a peace movement, while they created resistance to the Argentine military government by using nonviolent direct action.³³ When thinking about maternal identity, it is important to note that it differs from feminist identity. The Mothers have always made it clear that they are not feminists, mostly because they do not think the focus should be on women's identity as an effort to push forward women's rights as this would detract from their purpose of highlighting the disappearances.³⁴ As will become evident, I think their protest can be seen in a feminist light even if this was not their goal because they took up space in a male-dominated area of society and demonstrated how women could protest too, they were not limited to traditional female gender roles such as caring for the home. Furthermore, their care for their children at this time had to be expanded outside of the home because they were being disappeared in all spaces. It is true, however, that the Mothers were not making a feminist statement because their goals did not revolve around equal rights or some other form of equity for women but rather demands for the return of their disappeared loved ones.³⁵ It is also important to note the intention behind this argument too, the Mothers evidently knew a feminist protest would appear more threatening to the military dictatorship, so they made it explicitly clear that this was not their intention.

³³ Abreu Hernandez, "The Mothers of La Plaza de Mayo," 385.

³⁴ Sternbach, Brizeno, and de Bonafini, "Interview with Hebe de Bonafini," 20.

³⁵ Poe, "Feminism and Nonviolent Activism," 276.

This discussion of feminist and women's rights is one of the segments of the group where the differing opinions between the Mothers becomes clear because, while they agreed on most things aside from topics like abortion and LGBTQ+ rights, there was tension around referring to themselves as feminists.³⁶ Some of the Mothers explained that they would not have originally seen themselves as feminists until some reporters explained what it meant to be a feminist and they realized they were already acting in feminist ways. Some Mothers explained that they were made aware that feminism was not about hating men or being a lesbian, despite what some of them were told growing up. One of the Mothers, Nora Cortiñas, explains how they initially had a lack of knowledge around feminism but how she now realizes what the "Mothers have done was to place gender in the struggle, simply by carrying out our endeavor as women, confronting the military dictatorship, and challenging a society that had mistreated us because we were women—especially the military, the church, and the politicians,"³⁷ and this in itself was a feminist effort. Cortiñas went on to explain how she went back to school, attended feminist conferences, and how she felt strongly that women needed to stop acting like men when in office or representing a population, an evidently feminist claim.³⁸ The Mothers also distinguished their maternal identity from a feminist identity because, as Cortiñas says, that everything they did was informed by what their sons and daughters would have wanted.³⁹ Despite this slight disagreement, maternal identity remains a defining factor of the group and they were able to continue their work despite the differences between how they understand their connection to feminism and how that understanding changed over time.

³⁶ Graciela di Marco and Sonia E. Alvarez, "The Mothers and Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo Speak," in *Women's Activism in Latin America and the Caribbean: Engendering Social Justice, Democratizing Citizenship*, edited by Elizabeth Maier and Nathalie Lebon, 100, Rutgers University Press, 2010, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt5hj2ph.11>.

³⁷ Di Marco and Alvarez, "The Mothers and Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo Speak," 101.

³⁸ Di Marco and Alvarez, "The Mothers and Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo Speak," 102.

³⁹ Di Marco and Alvarez, "The Mothers and Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo Speak," 102.

It is reasonable to conclude that much of the scholarly work focused on the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo has been specifically on motherhood because this was one of the primary reasons why they were so successful. A recurring theme in the literature touches on the use of maternalism by women to engage outside of the private or domestic sphere.⁴⁰ This is important in this case because the goal of the military during the time when the Mothers were founded was to reinforce the marginalization of women's bodies, patriarchal values, among other gender-based issues.⁴¹ In relation to this, many scholars have highlighted how mothers in Argentina had private responsibilities as mothers that forced them to enter the public domain, something men cannot do in a state of terror.⁴² It is also important to highlight how the Mothers used their own agency in combination with the violence of the military to create what became known as militant motherhood—something that highlighted how traditional womanhood could coexist with public, political protest, and which was pioneered by the Mothers and gained significant attention from scholarly and public audiences alike. Furthermore, what is important here is to consider the emergence of the power of motherhood in the public domain as a direct result of the military's entrance into the private domain.⁴³ The military government, general oppression, and disappearances gave mothers something to respond to, fight against, and something around which to base the identity of their group, and this has intrinsic ties to maternal politics and feminist efforts, whether this was the Mothers' original objective or not.⁴⁴

In order to properly understand the extent to which maternal identity influenced the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, it is important to consider ethic of care theory. Care ethics will

⁴⁰ Jadwiga E. Pieper Mooney, "Militant Motherhood Re-Visited: Women's Participation and Political Power in Argentina and Chile: Militant Motherhood Re-Visited," *History Compass* 5, no. 3 (May 2007): 975, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1478-0542.2007.00435.x>.

⁴¹ Pieper Mooney, "Militant Motherhood Re-Visited," 976.

⁴² Pieper Mooney, "Militant Motherhood Re-Visited," 982.

⁴³ Pieper Mooney, "Militant Motherhood Re-Visited," 983.

⁴⁴ Poe, "Feminism and Nonviolent Activism," 276.

prove useful throughout this work, so I will also bring it up in the following sections. Fiona Robinson's feminist ethic of care theory takes elements from and builds off of Sara Ruddick's maternal thinking with specific focus on caring and highlights ways to deal with violence that are based on the necessary experience of having been cared for and caring for others.⁴⁵ It is also important to note that feminist ethic of care theory attempts to avoid essentializing women to roles as caregivers, defining who is permitted to care and thereby reinforcing power relations or paternalism.⁴⁶ However, feminist care ethics remains important and can help to understand how the Mothers saw this organization as a way to care for their children, even in death. Caring was central to their maternal identity because this was one of the things they all had in common, they were caring for their children by searching for them and demanding their return.

Moreover, many of the Mothers claimed, in reference to their children, that "it is they who have brought us into the world,"⁴⁷ or, as Nora Cortiñas said "our children gave birth to us"⁴⁸ as the Mothers often describe how their children provided them with an avenue to act, indicating a two-way relationship that constructed their maternal identity. This maternal identity informed the actions of the organization as well, Hebe de Bonafini contrasted the panic the Mothers faced when their children were disappeared with other people going about their daily lives and men lounging around.⁴⁹ This clearly ties back to the practice of caring and the role the Mothers felt was their responsibility to take. Hebe also explained that she worked to educate herself through her children in a way, for example her son at one point had told her that what little they had, they

⁴⁵ Robinson, *The Ethics of Care*, 4.

⁴⁶ Robinson, *The Ethics of Care*, 104.

⁴⁷ Alicia Dujovne Ortiz, "The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo," *The UNESCO Courier: a window open on the world* 9, (September 1995): 22.

⁴⁸ Mabel Bellucci, "Childless Motherhood: Interview with Nora Cortiñas, a Mother of the Plaza de Mayo, Argentina," *Reproductive Health Matters* 7, no. 13 (1999): 83, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3775707>.

⁴⁹ Hebe de Bonafini, and Matilde Sánchez, "The Madwomen at the Plaza de Mayo," in *The Argentina Reader: History, Culture, Politics*, edited by Gabriela Nouzeilles and Graciela Montaldo, Duke University Press, 2002, 5, <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822384182-068>.

should share with others,⁵⁰ which she took to heart in her fight through the organization and applied the practice of caring to the community as a whole.

Creation and Maintenance of a Common Identity

Symbols also played a large role in the creation and sustenance of the organization's maternal identity. The Mothers could demand respect through their maternal identity, and as noted, no other protests or any form of organizing was being allowed by the Argentine government during this time. In contrast, the Mothers were primarily left alone because they had to be forgiven for how the grief made them react and how they had a responsibility as women to preserve the memory of their children and of those disappeared, because of their role as mourners. The role of a mother in many societies, including that of Argentina, is to mourn and to commemorate the dead.⁵¹ In this sense, they could not go past the boundaries of motherhood or they would certainly be punished, even more harshly than they were, so they turned to symbols and walked silently around the Plaza.⁵² The Mothers used white headscarves that would distinguish them from other community members because they were covering their hair as if in mourning but they used white scarves to symbolize peace and life.⁵³ This is also an example of the private entering the public as the private symbol of the child's cloth diaper became the public symbol of a kerchief, again returning to that common theme of shifting from the private to the public. They would also carry pictures of their disappeared children, as all mothers possessed the right to look for their child. The use of photographs also worked to disprove claims made by the military junta who said the individuals who disappeared actually never existed in an attempt to

⁵⁰ Sternbach, Brizeno, and de Bonafini, "Interview with Hebe de Bonafini," 18.

⁵¹ Orozco Mendoza, "Maternal Activism," 2.

⁵² Fabj, "Motherhood as a Political Voice," 7.

⁵³ Fabj, "Motherhood as a Political Voice," 8.

avoid responsibility. The concept of maternal identity has also been drawn on by scholars to explain why and how the Mothers planned petitions of habeas corpus, recovered bodies, and learned where others were during such a restrictive and violent time. All of these examples demonstrate how integral maternal identity was to the success of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo.

The power of maternal identity is demonstrated by the fact that the Mothers initially did not feel connected to each other. Hebe de Bonafini highlighted how they were “anonymous, distrustful people, united by the paperwork and the lives we were trying to recover,” and initially did not speak,⁵⁴ but later on, they realized that they needed each other and had a lot in common based on their maternal responsibilities to search for their children and the difficulties they faced in doing so. One of the Mothers, Vera Jarach highlights how the Mothers’ questions were “met with a great wall of silence, silence from the authorities, silence from society at large, silence from diplomats and governments,”⁵⁵ so the only ones working to look for the disappeared were these mothers. Furthermore, as the organization grew, the commitments of the Mothers became more closely linked and they noted feeling more strongly connected to one another.⁵⁶ This closer relationship was, however, not entirely positive because as the Mothers became more connected, this meant there were more Mothers joining the organization and indicated that the severity of the dictatorship pressed on because they had more time to become connected and were forced to face the loss of more disappeared children.

⁵⁴ De Bonafini and Sánchez, “The Madwomen at the Plaza de Mayo,” 430.

⁵⁵ Anna Norman, “The Mothers of Plaza de Mayo: ‘We Are No Longer Alone,’” Produced by openDemocracy, translated from Spanish, December 4, 2017, YouTube video, 0:33, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/vera-jarach-interview/>.

⁵⁶ De Bonafini and Sánchez, “The Madwomen at the Plaza de Mayo,” 6.

While maternal elements certainly informed the identity of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, there were additional core elements that helped to construct this identity in their case. The Mothers had a few key things in common: their children's involvement in activism, their class status, and their religious beliefs. As noted previously, class played a large role in this organization but remains missing from much of the scholarly writing, as does the religion of the Mothers if they were not Catholic, making it difficult to draw concrete claims about which elements of their identities may have been most influential to their connection. Many of the Mothers highlighted their children's involvement in political activism as a reason they were able to connect. Nora Cortiñas explained that her son "had been working for many years in defense of the unprotected in Latin America: the indigenous peoples, the peasants,"⁵⁷ and Renée Epelbaum noted the social justice efforts her children were involved in. One of her sons, a "non-violent, political group called The Working Youth [where] they discussed ways to help in poor neighbourhoods and to promote literacy," and how as a doctor he "understood much of the pain suffered by others." She explained how this helped her to connect with the other Mothers because, as they marched through the Plaza, they each spoke to their dead children and "all of their love brings them closer to the image of their dead children."⁵⁸

Furthermore, the bulk of the Mothers were working class, which provided them with more common ground and, while there were other human rights movements operating across Argentina during the time of the military dictatorship, they were often reserved for the upper-class or wealthy elites, leaving the working-class with limited opportunities for protest.⁵⁹ Additionally, as referenced before, many of the disappeared children were working on class-

⁵⁷ Di Marco and Alvarez, "The Mothers and Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo Speak," 96.

⁵⁸ Agosin, *The Mothers of Plaza de Mayo*, 61.

⁵⁹ Orozco Mendoza, "Maternal Activism," 4.

focused projects and, in general, also belonged to the working or middle class.⁶⁰ As noted, the role of class in the organization, while important to the identity of the Mothers, is often left out of scholarly analyses as will be explored in more detail in the following chapter.

The roles the Mothers adopted also informed their maternal identity, so this section will consider a short number of them to help gain a better understanding of the complexity of maternal identity and why it was successful. One of the most obvious roles of a mother is to raise a child, and some of the Mothers maintained strong opinions as to what extent mothers should be held accountable for the actions of their children. Hebe de Bonafini considered the military regime a class struggle and, while she was careful to not fully blame the mothers of those involved in the military dictatorship, highlighted how mothers are responsible for the actions of their children, and because the mothers of the military men were most often rich or middle class,⁶¹ there was a complex involvement of class into this maternal role. Many of the Mothers also felt strongly about protecting the image of their children and defending the honour of their children. This is evidenced as one Mother faced accusations from bystanders while marching in the Plaza and shouted back, in defense of her daughter, that she was “no terrorist but a student and an exemplary daughter.”⁶²

While maternal identity was not dependent on a woman’s identity after giving birth, having children, or practicing motherhood, these traditional elements did play an important role in how the Mothers presented themselves and used this traditional understanding to their benefit. The march the Mothers took around the Plaza was said to be “round like their bellies and the

⁶⁰ Fisher, *Mothers of the Disappeared*, 13, 31.

⁶¹ Sternbach, Brizeno, and de Bonafini, “Interview with Hebe de Bonafini,” 20.

⁶² Luciana Bertoia, “Buenos Aires Herald: The newspaper that told the horror and the glory,” *Papelitos*. <https://papelitos.com.ar/nota/buenos-aires-herald>.

world through which their protest echoes,”⁶³ which is clearly a very powerful statement that ties back to motherhood and explains the Mothers’ role in the world and how their maternal responsibility informed their actions. This traditional theme appears again as the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo traced the routes of their grandchildren who were forced into adoption to military families and as they spoke of the genetic chain as a woman’s weapon.⁶⁴

Maternal identity became a point of unity for the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo that helped them to form necessary support networks. One of the Mothers, who remains unnamed, shared her story of looking for her pregnant daughter with Hebe de Bonafini who highlighted how she felt a “tremendous sense of solidarity with her pain,” and began to think her own pain at the disappearance of her child was not as serious after hearing this woman explain her struggles.⁶⁵ Hebe explained that she felt a “bond of sisterhood with that woman” and finally felt understood by another person in this isolating and devastating loss, which clearly indicates the value of maternal identity in forming connections.⁶⁶ This sentiment is not uncommon among the Mothers as Renée Epelbaum said her past is not important, but that her story is as painful as any of the other Mothers. She also highlighted that the interviewer, Marjorie Agosin, could speak to any one of the Mothers and get the same story, indicating their united front and the common identity they shared.⁶⁷

This bond based on maternal identity and lived experience with the disappearance of a child was extremely important, not only to the organization, but also to the Mothers themselves because they often lost other ties, for example with other friends whose children were not taken

⁶³ Dujovne Ortiz, “The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo,” 23.

⁶⁴ Dujovne Ortiz, “The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo,” 24.

⁶⁵ De Bonafini and Sánchez, “The Madwomen at the Plaza de Mayo,” 3.

⁶⁶ De Bonafini and Sánchez, “The Madwomen at the Plaza de Mayo,” 3.

⁶⁷ Agosin, *The Mothers of Plaza de Mayo*, 25.

because it was considered bad luck to interact with the parent of a disappeared child.⁶⁸ The Mothers were said to be a great help to each other, even just by walking silently arm and arm through the Plaza.⁶⁹ Vera Jarach also explained how they started with a small group of about fourteen Mothers at the Plaza de Mayo and were told by military officials that they could not stand around, so they walked and became supports for each other, walking arm in arm.⁷⁰ She highlighted the value of the images of the headscarves but also of the friendships they formed in solidarity with each other and the intrinsic connections they possessed.

As the movement progressed over the course of the military dictatorship, the Mothers developed what they referred to as a sense of humor in that, for example, if one was arrested, they would all demand to go, an act that infuriated the police.⁷¹ What this really demonstrates is that they became skilled at moving together, acting in unison, which they could do because of their maternal identity and connections. Similarly, as mentioned, these women had a unique experience drawing them together: the loss of a child. Additionally, their previous lived experience connected them as most of them were primarily housewives with no ties to political parties or experience with the political arena—an issue which will be explored in more depth shortly.⁷² Furthermore, in response to a reporter questioning her actions at a student protest that became violent in Argentina in 1996, Hebe de Bonafini expressed how blood had not been spilled into a scarf of a Mother but how she was not afraid to die if it meant protecting children, which demonstrates the lasting quality of this identity.⁷³

⁶⁸ Agosin, *The Mothers of Plaza de Mayo*, 30.

⁶⁹ Norman, “The Mothers of Plaza de Mayo: ‘We Are No Longer Alone,’” 3:55.

⁷⁰ Norman, “The Mothers of Plaza de Mayo: ‘We Are No Longer Alone,’” 4:20.

⁷¹ Dujovne Ortiz, “The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo,” 26.

⁷² De Bonafini and Sánchez, “The Madwomen at the Plaza de Mayo,” 5.

⁷³ Calvin Sims, “Buenos Aires Journal; The Rock, Unyielding, Of the Plaza De Mayo,” *The New York Times*, March 2, 1996, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/1996/03/02/world/buenos-aires-journal-the-rock-unyielding-of-the-plaza-de-mayo.html>.

Consider also how this maternal identity forced the Mothers to react. As Taty Almeida explained “of course we were mad. Mad with grief, with impotence. They took a woman’s most precious gift, her child,” indicating again how their protest was not a choice they made but rather it was an impossible situation to which they were forced to react.⁷⁴ Hebe de Bonafini articulated a similar pressure as she said she could not stay still when her son was taken, she had to do something.⁷⁵ The Mothers also explained how it was their role as mothers that did not allow them to remain quiet, even if people thought they were “mad”.⁷⁶ Many Mothers mentioned sentiments of wanting to die, but how they felt they had a responsibility to keep living for the children.⁷⁷ They came to see their marching and other actions as a form of expression, so by stopping the protest, they would let death win. This was seen as a collective effort, they were marching for their own children but also for the disappeared as a collective, reaching beyond the individual to create this idea of “universal mothers.”⁷⁸ This common sentiment, a feeling of despair mediated somewhat by action, is what worked in conjunction with maternal identity to form a united organization.

Marianismo and Religion

It is also important to define motherhood and maternal identity within the context of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo because motherhood is not a universal concept and varies greatly depending on the cultural context. The prominence of the Mothers in global discourse surrounding maternity and the intense connection between motherhood and the success of their

⁷⁴ Uki Goñi, “40 years later, the mothers of Argentina’s ‘disappeared’ refuse to be silent.” *The Guardian*, April 28, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/apr/28/mothers-plaza-de-mayo-argentina-anniversary>.

⁷⁵ Sternbach, Brizeno, and de Bonafini, “Interview with Hebe de Bonafini,” 22.

⁷⁶ Goñi, “40 years later, the mothers of Argentina’s ‘disappeared’ refuse to be silent.”

⁷⁷ Agosin, *The Mothers of Plaza de Mayo*, 33.

⁷⁸ Dujovne Ortiz, “The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo,” 26.

protest qualifies them as an exceptional group to provide insight into the exploration of motherhood for peace. In the Latin American context and as it applies to Argentina, religion plays a large role in the construction of maternal identity. There are elements of religion, built out of ancient Indigenous understandings, myths, and colonial Catholicism that develop a definition of how motherhood should function. *Marianismo* is understood as the corresponding piece to *machismo*, which is understood as an embodiment of virility.⁷⁹ *Marianismo* creates the image of an ideal mother in the Latin American context and defines it as a “feminine spiritual superiority, which teaches that women are semi-divine, morally superior to and spiritually stronger than men.”⁸⁰ Ultimately, *marianismo* conceptualizes the “good woman as mother” that essentially outlines how a mother has a responsibility, and often a desire, to maintain feminine virtues such as being self-sacrificial, non-confrontational, possessing the desire to uphold a family, and acting as the one responsible for mourning as defined by the Virgin Mary and the Latin American mother goddess who possesses the source of life.⁸¹

This ties into the large discussion by scholars about the Mothers and their culturally significant role as good mothers.⁸² Their identity as mothers allows the switch from the private realm to the public realm while maintaining that identity. It is also important to note that the Mothers were not pretending to be men or acting in the ways men would act. They came together when they were isolated and scared, so the emotional aspect was never fake or strategic, they simply manipulated it to present a specific image. Furthermore, the use of the identity of *marianismo* was crucial because it provided a stable identity, through the outlines of the spiritually strong woman, the morally good, the self-sacrificial, the semi-divine, and the

⁷⁹ Fabj, “Motherhood as a Political Voice,” 4.

⁸⁰ Fabj, “Motherhood as a Political Voice,” 4.

⁸¹ Fabj, “Motherhood as a Political Voice,” 1, 4, 5.

⁸² Burchianti, “Building Bridges of Memory,” 141.

responsible for mourning, it is important because it ties into the ancient myth of mother goddess as source of life and Virgin Mary, which, as stated, is a common theme throughout Latin America.⁸³

The identity of the Mothers through the concept of *marianismo* was maintained throughout the protests as the Mothers remained peaceful, “apolitical and non-confrontational.”⁸⁴ This identity, as constructed in part through religion, outlines family as the priority and highlights how others must respect motherhood, which becomes central to the identification of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo and has historical ties to religion.⁸⁵ This is also important because the clergy remained uninvolved in the conflict and the atrocities committed by the Argentine military government that claims arose that the Church was supporting the military, even as nuns were being killed and disappeared.⁸⁶ Unlike in other cases of political violence and unrest across Latin America in places like Chile, the Catholic Church did not do anything to demand an end to these human rights offenses.⁸⁷ One of the primary reasons this occurred is because the Argentine Church did not bother reaching the poor, which changed how the Church was viewed by the lower class who were left on their own.⁸⁸

The intersections of maternal identity and religious identity remain influential to the success of this organization. Religion is an important topic as it was an element that helped to tie the Mothers together, similar to class, as the Mothers were often religious so shared this commonality and would use church spaces to gather on occasion. Some of the Mothers have addressed how they felt unsafe speaking to priests because of their alleged ties to the military but

⁸³ Fabj, “Motherhood as a Political Voice,” 4.

⁸⁴ Fabj, “Motherhood as a Political Voice,” 1.

⁸⁵ Fabj, “Motherhood as a Political Voice,” 5.

⁸⁶ Agosin and Franzen, “A Visit to the Mothers,” 431.

⁸⁷ Fisher, *Mothers of the Disappeared*, 109-126.

⁸⁸ Gustavo Morello, *The Catholic Church and Argentina's Dirty War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190234270.001.0001>.

how they still felt strong ties to religion and higher powers.⁸⁹ Religion continued to play a role, not just in constructing a maternal identity, but because the Mothers also involved religion and prayers in their fight to return their disappeared children.⁹⁰

When the Mothers heard that some priests were on the military planes that were responsible for dropping the disappeared into the Rio de la Plata, they marched into cathedrals and chanted prayers demanding these priests not be forgiven as they had disrespected God and religion.⁹¹ Religious spaces became difficult spaces for the Mothers because, though religion informed maternal identities in many ways and the Mothers depended on religious practices, they felt betrayed by the Church. This tension became increasingly difficult as the Dirty War pressed on because, with increased prosecution, the Mothers felt the need to be in church more often to find the strength to continue their fight, despite the grievances they held against the priests.⁹² Finally, at its core, maternal identity was informed by the wishes of their children, so as noted in the Mothers' *Letter to Pope John Paul II*, many of the Mothers' children were dependent on religion and Jesus as they dedicated themselves to the community, the Mothers felt strongly that they needed to do the same.⁹³

It is important to note that *marianismo* has been critiqued, for similar reasons as care ethics, for being essentializing of women and mothers and for presenting limited views on how women can act within the political arena. One of the other limits to the lens of *marianismo* is that it is rooted in colonial understandings of Catholicism. In this sense, *marianismo* also rejects Jewish mothers because of its Catholic ties. As evidenced above, religion played a large role in

⁸⁹ Guzman Bouvard, *Revolutionizing Motherhood*, 8.

⁹⁰ Dujovne Ortiz, "The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo," 23.

⁹¹ Dujovne Ortiz, "The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo," 24.

⁹² De Bonafini and Sánchez, "The Madwomen at the Plaza de Mayo," 10.

⁹³ "Letter to Pope John Paul II: Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo," in *International Human Rights* Jean McMahon, 1999, <https://journals-sagepub-com.login.ezproxy.library.ualberta.ca/doi/abs/10.2190/3KB1-CJXN-6B7T-EV7H>.

the creation of maternal identity and while this was clear in Catholicism, there was a significant number of the Mothers who were Jewish. Some of these women were even Holocaust survivors and pointed out the connections between Argentina's military dictatorship and the ideologies of the Nazi regime.⁹⁴ Many of the Mothers were able to connect with each other as they had the same lived experiences as Jewish women who were punished for their Jewish identity or as Holocaust survivors.⁹⁵

Maternal Thinking and Strategy

Maternal identity in this case also ties strongly into maternal thinking from Sara Ruddick and scholars who build off of her work. Maternal thinking, as it will be used in this project, refers to a “discipline of thought” that is resultant of caring for children but which must be constructed through practice, which outlines a set of criteria to reach a specific goal, and highlights the ability to prioritize.⁹⁶ What is also important to the case of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo is the link between maternal thinking and the social conditioning of women, evidenced similarly through *marianismo*, to create knowledge and practices around caring for others within the family and community. Furthermore, maternal thinking makes it clear that efforts for peace through identity are not dependent on some intrinsic component of motherhood and refutes the idea that mothers have some intrinsic peaceful ability.⁹⁷ This creation of practices based on the act of mothering is most relevant for the case of the Mothers because this is how they often viewed their entrance into the political realm. This also helps to mediate the risk of essentializing mothers and recognizes that they are a product of their environments, among other

⁹⁴ Goñi, “40 years later, the mothers of Argentina’s ‘disappeared’ refuse to be silent.”

⁹⁵ Agosin, *The Mothers of Plaza de Mayo*, 33.

⁹⁶ Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking*, 24.

⁹⁷ Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking*, 30.

factors and highlights how, because maternal thinking is a practice, it is not limited to women but can be applied to other scenarios more broadly.⁹⁸

Relatedly, motherhood, though it is traditionally understood as such, does not always come from giving birth but rather is seen as a result of “systematic experiences of social and political neglect, economic deprivation, physical injury, and even death,”⁹⁹ which indicates it as a response to conflict. Maternal thinking has been taken up in more recent contexts to highlight its value as a version of standpoint theory because practices of mothering are on the outskirts of society and the dominant way of being but still play a central role in society.¹⁰⁰ This rings especially true for the case of the Mothers as they existed outside of the political sphere before their protests yet played a central role in society because of their maternal identity. “Feminine characteristics, even when seen as virtues, have played a significant role in women’s general epistemic disauthorization,”¹⁰¹ but Ruddick pushes back against this idea by highlighting the “intellectual virtues most valuable for achieving reliable knowledge.”¹⁰² Ruddick challenges the idea that society must avoid limiting women to these perceived notions and remain open to their cognitive abilities. Furthermore, because Ruddick’s work focuses on practice, it refutes the idea that there is a biological basis or undoubtable nurturing ability based on feminine identity.¹⁰³

The Mothers also highlight how they were scared and how they lacked experience, thinking, planning, and political knowledge. One mother, reflecting on her experiences, remembers how they were “absolutely terrified,”¹⁰⁴ and another, Gastelú, explains how if she

⁹⁸ Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking*, 40-41.

⁹⁹ Orozco Mendoza, “Maternal Activism,” 1.

¹⁰⁰ Linda Martín Alcoff, “Rethinking Maternal Thinking,” *APA Newsletter on Feminism and Philosophy* 3, no. 1 (Fall 2003): 88, <https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.apaonline.org/resource/collection/D03EBDAB-82D7-4B28-B897-C050FDC1ACB4/v03n1Feminism.pdf>.

¹⁰¹ Alcoff, “Rethinking Maternal Thinking,” 88.

¹⁰² Alcoff, “Rethinking Maternal Thinking,” 88.

¹⁰³ Alcoff, “Rethinking Maternal Thinking,” 88.

¹⁰⁴ Goñi, “40 years later, the mothers of Argentina’s ‘disappeared’ refuse to be silent.”

brought up her “kidnapped son at the hairdresser or supermarket they would run away” as it was dangerous even to listen,¹⁰⁵ clearly indicating the recurring theme that they were acting primarily out of fear. While the organization of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo and their protests are often seen as an entrance for women into the political arena, as was discussed earlier with the differentiation between maternal and feminist efforts in this case, the Mothers were not trying to make political advances for themselves or gain additional rights for women. Nora Cortiñas illustrated her fear that her actions in the organization would make things worse for her son, who, at the time, was still unsure if had been killed.¹⁰⁶ In contrast with this and to return to my previous argument, the Mothers used this fear and inexperience as a tool as they were aware it awarded them specific securities from the military. In this sense, if the military perceived them to be a group of harmless, naive mothers who lacked political knowledge and experience, they were more likely to simply be annoyed by the Mothers’ protest but ultimately let them march. While there is no doubt that the Mothers were scared and had little experience with this kind of organizing, it is also important to consider their strategic framing of their protest and how it remained centred around their identity as mothers to remain less threatening.

The Mothers’ lack of political agenda and experience at the very start of their organizing is clearly demonstrated by the fact that they were not taking notes of the little things and how, at first, nobody foresaw the future of the group.¹⁰⁷ This lack of political experience was not always by their own choice, but sometimes enforced by their social and cultural environment, this is clear as Hebe de Bonafini expressed how, before the Dirty War, she was intrigued by issues like electricity that did not work because of government mismanagement and other political issues

¹⁰⁵ Goñi, “40 years later, the mothers of Argentina’s ‘disappeared’ refuse to be silent.”

¹⁰⁶ Di Marco and Alvarez, “The Mothers and Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo Speak,” 96.

¹⁰⁷ De Bonafini and Sánchez, “The Madwomen at the Plaza de Mayo,” 5.

but was kept apolitical by her family.¹⁰⁸ Many of them were also unfamiliar with the city of Buenos Aires, so many of the Mothers did not want to go to the obelisk there but preferred to remain in their own cities where the cathedrals were quiet and familiar.¹⁰⁹ Hebe de Bonafini explained her own bringing up in a small barrio and contrasts this with the big city of Buenos Aires¹¹⁰ where the Mothers were primarily forced to organize.

The Mothers were accepted by the military because they appeared to have no political interests, this was a crucial component of their identity because it allowed them to defy the boundaries of what activism was permitted during this time. They claimed to simply want their children back but note that this in itself was a demand for political reform as it applies to all the disappeared, not just their children. So, even if it was inadvertent, the Mothers were demanding improvements to the political setting of the country, which was not normally something that women would be allowed to do at this time.¹¹¹ Additionally, their identity as mothers allowed them to bypass rationality—many of the Mothers have highlighted how they were not thinking—it was a desperate act, not one of political planning as their goal was simply to be heard which made them somewhat more palatable.¹¹² This also awarded them a certain leniency from the military dictatorship because they could rely on the claim that they were not thinking and unaware of the potential consequences of their protest. Some scholars have even argued that “women have special characteristics which allow them to better understand social problems,” so women as mothers are able to use their identity to protest laws and conditions that prevent successful motherhood without being hugely targeted by the state.¹¹³

¹⁰⁸ Sternbach, Brizeno, and de Bonafini, “Interview with Hebe de Bonafini,” 16.

¹⁰⁹ De Bonafini and Sánchez, “The Madwomen at the Plaza de Mayo,” 5.

¹¹⁰ Sternbach, Brizeno, and de Bonafini, “Interview with Hebe de Bonafini,” 18.

¹¹¹ Fabj, “Motherhood as a Political Voice,” 1.

¹¹² Fabj, “Motherhood as a Political Voice,” 6.

¹¹³ Fabj, “Motherhood as a Political Voice,” 6.

Furthermore, despite this fear, it is important to note that the Mothers were not acting irrationally. Many of the Mothers highlighted how just because they were scared, this does not mean that they did not make strategic decisions.¹¹⁴ Renée Epelbaum made this clear as she explained that too much has been said about the politicization of the Mothers and focuses on how there were only three to four Mothers to begin with and she said “we were desperate, but we were also rationally searching for an immediate solution.”¹¹⁵ They saw this form of organizing as a last resort after they had repeatedly been shut out by the consulates, embassies, ministries, and churches.¹¹⁶ Hebe de Bonafini explained how the Mothers began to meet up, but a “lot of things we did unconsciously, never even stopping to think about the risks we were taking.”¹¹⁷ Relatedly, their identity as mothers was used by the military to discredit them as crazy.¹¹⁸ In this vein, the military dictatorship relied on the concept of female hysteria as an attempt to take away some of the power and support the Mothers were garnering. The military dictatorship relied on the upholding of traditional gendered power structures and the related gender performances, so they could not have the Mothers gathering political power in this way, which led them to make these sweeping claims of unwarranted panic coming from these women who were supposed to remain unseen.¹¹⁹

While there was action from the Mothers across Argentina, it was centralized in Buenos Aires as this is where the heart of the country exists and it holds importance for Argentine politics.¹²⁰ Evidently, though they lacked, or at least presented a lack of, initial knowledge of

¹¹⁴ Dujovne Ortiz, “The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo,” 24.

¹¹⁵ Agosin, *The Mothers of Plaza de Mayo*, 35.

¹¹⁶ Ailín Bullentini, “The international press and the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo: The other side of the World Cup,” *Papelitos*, http://papelitos.com.ar/nota/la-prensa-internacional-y-las-madres-de-plaza-de-mayo?z_language=en.

¹¹⁷ Sternbach, Brizeno, and de Bonafini, “Interview with Hebe de Bonafini,” 18.

¹¹⁸ De Bonafini and Sánchez, “The Madwomen at the Plaza de Mayo,” 10.

¹¹⁹ Diana Taylor, *Disappearing Acts: Spectacles of Gender and Nationalism in Argentina's 'Dirty War.'* 183-222 (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822399285>.

¹²⁰ Agosin and Franzen, “A Visit to the Mothers,” 430.

political systems and protests, the Mothers were quick to learn. This was especially clear around the time of the World Cup in 1978 as they profited off of the increased media presence to spread their message. They spoke to international reporters who, in turn, shared their messages with local viewers from their home countries—effectively engaging audiences across the world. While they did not set out knowing how to hold meetings, they recognized their strength in numbers so they changed locations of the meetings so more could attend and created a division of labour within the organization.¹²¹ Additionally, while they were connected by this maternal identity, the Mothers were known to take on different, collective identities when in the Plaza, to ensure they presented themselves in a unified manner, indicating the value of this collective maternal identity for the success and unification of the organization and its image.¹²² Evidently, this was a strategic approach and they faced minimal prosecution for presenting an image of an unknowing, desperate mother within this maternal identity.

When considering the value of maternal identity to the organization of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, it is crucial to consider how this identity may have allowed them a sense of protection. Hebe de Bonafini highlights how, at first, the Mothers were protected by grief and she said she knew the military were hoping the Mothers would simply get tired of protesting and leave because they were unsure of what to do with them.¹²³ The military and police forces attempted to divide the Mothers up to prevent their growing and depending on each other.¹²⁴ The military was uncomfortable in dealing with the Mothers because the organization was strictly

¹²¹ Sternbach, Brizeno, and de Bonafini, “Interview with Hebe de Bonafini,” 19; Bellucci, “Childless Motherhood: Interview with Nora Cortiñas, a Mother of the Plaza de Mayo, Argentina,” 85.

¹²² Agosin, *The Mothers of Plaza de Mayo*, 37.

¹²³ De Bonafini and Sánchez, “The Madwomen at the Plaza de Mayo,” 6.

¹²⁴ De Bonafini and Sánchez, “The Madwomen at the Plaza de Mayo,” 6.

women¹²⁵ and, as discussed through the consideration of *marianismo* as having a large role in Latin America, mothers hold a respected position in Argentine society.

She explained that women's political action is united with and by love,¹²⁶ that "it was the strength of women, of mothers, that kept us going,"¹²⁷ a common sentiment among the Mothers. Renée Epelbaum similarly said they possessed messages of love that must turn to action.¹²⁸ This also relates to the fathers of the disappeared who continuously told their wives it was dangerous to protest the dictatorship, they were the ones responsible for contacting the lawyers when the Mothers were arrested. The fathers could not oppose the military officials, speak to them, or participate in the organization in direct ways, otherwise they would face murder or imprisonment and put the group at risk.¹²⁹ Existing as a father of a disappeared person was a stigma and the men in Argentina were often seen as helpless in the face of this violence.¹³⁰ This is represented through the fact that more fathers died from sentiments of desperation than mothers did because, as Hebe de Bonafini explained, "what we did was socialize motherhood, we transformed our grief into struggle."¹³¹

Conclusion

In conclusion, maternal identity in the case of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo is complex, but the social conditioning and practice they had in caring conditioned them for this work and, as they saw it, they had no option other than to use their identity to resist the military dictatorship. Through the consideration of motherhood and feminism, the creation and

¹²⁵ Bellucci, "Childless Motherhood: Interview with Nora Cortiñas, a Mother of the Plaza de Mayo, Argentina," 84.

¹²⁶ Sternbach, Brizeno, and de Bonafini, "Interview with Hebe de Bonafini," 22.

¹²⁷ Sternbach, Brizeno, and de Bonafini, "Interview with Hebe de Bonafini," 19.

¹²⁸ Agosin, *The Mothers of Plaza de Mayo*, 75.

¹²⁹ Di Marco and Alvarez, "The Mothers and Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo Speak," 96.

¹³⁰ Agosin, *The Mothers of Plaza de Mayo*, 36.

¹³¹ Sternbach, Brizeno, and de Bonafini, "Interview with Hebe de Bonafini," 19.

maintenance of a common identity, the role of *marianismo* and religion, in addition to maternal thinking and the related political strategy, it is clear that identity allowed the Mothers to be effective in their protest and, therefore, their influence on the end of the dictatorship. It is clear that the Mothers built up a sense of identity that was rooted in their maternal sense of self and used it to create a collective identity. I argue that this collective identity was not completely natural to the Mothers and that, because it was not an innate quality that belonged to the Mothers or unique facet of this group, it can certainly be adopted by other peace efforts organizations. Overall, while maternal identity was not the only identity that unified this group, it is clear that it played a crucial role in the success of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo as an organization and allowed them a certain sense of protection from the violence of the military dictatorship based on their presented image of inexperience.

Chapter Two: The Goal of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo

Introduction

The second chapter of this thesis will focus on the goal of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo. They had a common goal which was to get their children back and they built their protest around this goal. It was helpful for them to have this common goal because it allowed the movement to remain focused. The organization remained strong even over the most difficult years of the military dictatorship because the goal of the group informed all of their actions and protests. This chapter will explore the goal of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in relation to its perceived simplicity, the evolution of this goal after the military dictatorship, the connection between their goal and their identities, what is left out of this goal, the role of care, and finally the lasting implications of this goal. Most of this chapter will focus on the period of the military dictatorship to analyze the goal of the Mothers as it existed at its core and at its most influential time. Overall, their goal was inextricably linked to their maternal identity as discussed in the previous chapter, but the role of clear goals can be applied more broadly to peace organizations.

Their Goal Explored and the Role of Simplicity

The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo came up with a number of cries for the return of their children such as “our children were taken alive; we want them back alive.”¹³² The Mothers highlighted how they knew this was not realistic as the disappeared were more than likely gone forever, but the cry was shouted in the hopes that it would bring those who were ignorant or complacent in society into the heart of the issue of these disappearances and to encourage all of Argentine society to realize the severity of the situation.¹³³ The demand for the return of their

¹³² De Bonafini and Sánchez, “The Madwomen at the Plaza de Mayo,” 10.

¹³³ De Bonafini and Sánchez, “The Madwomen at the Plaza de Mayo,” 10.

children was a crucial element of the image of the organization as the Mothers always claimed they needed to know the full truth to achieve justice and that without justice through the return of their children, these disappearances would continue happening—indicating a need for continued protest.¹³⁴ The Mothers took seriously concerns surrounding the future of their children and, more broadly, of their country which influenced how they framed this goal.

This theme of demanding the return of their children is central to the organization and is repeated constantly throughout the efforts of the Mothers during the period of military dictatorship and in later interviews. Marta, one of the Mothers, said that they wanted to know where their children were, “to know if they are alive, if they are dead, nothing else.”¹³⁵ This seemingly straightforward goal was essential for the success of the organization because it allowed the Mothers to remain united in their efforts and remain relatively unharmed by the military who were targeting protests during their rule. It is important to note that the Mothers received little press coverage, the only Argentinian newspaper reporting on the disappearances, or the actions of the Mothers was the Buenos Aires Herald, so keeping the message understandable was also an important political decision in this sense.

This clear message and goal was also integral to the identity of the Mothers because they highlighted how they only wanted the military dictatorship to tell them the truth and because without the bodies there could be no mourning and they could not process the deaths of their children and loved ones.¹³⁶ This was important because, as discussed in the previous chapter, the role of mourning is one that is primarily taken up or designated to mothers in Latin American societies. Furthermore, “minorities succeed in keeping alive a painful fragment of an

¹³⁴ Norman, “The Mothers of Plaza de Mayo: ‘We Are No Longer Alone,’” 4:40.

¹³⁵ Bullentini, “The international press and the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo: The other side of the World Cup.”

¹³⁶ Bellucci, “Childless Motherhood: Interview with Nora Cortiñas, a Mother of the Plaza de Mayo, Argentina,” 85.

increasingly less recent past, despite the pressure coming from the majority of the nation,”¹³⁷ which is connected to maternal roles. In this sense, because the Mothers made a switch fairly early in their organizing from initially demanding the truth of the disappeared to demanding the reappearance of the disappeared they demonstrated this as it connects to their refusal to mourn which could not be done until there is a body.¹³⁸ Nora Cortiñas highlighted how if there was no body, there could be no mourning as the Mothers could not process the death of their children.¹³⁹ This responsibility for death demonstrates the gendered roles that appear during times of conflict, exemplified through the responsibility taken by the Mothers for the dead and disappeared.

All of the notes and letters that Renée Epelbaum possessed from the period of military rule demonstrated how they were able to continue their protest while remaining centred on this specific goal. These letters and notes were shown to Marjorie Agosin when she went to interview Renée and her housekeeper and companion, Ester. She had collected and written a number of poems, manuscript pieces, notes, and letters during the time of the military dictatorship and the most active period of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo. Most of these writings were about the efforts the Mothers were making and communication they shared to preserve the memory of the movement in addition to the more basic, practical elements they had to discuss such as how to send their appeal to the Pope. Some of these writings were her personal diary entries and notes speaking about how she was empty with the loss of her loved one, her son.¹⁴⁰ These pieces also discussed how the Mothers valued memory and how they claimed they must maintain their activities with the change of governments because it is the responsibility of the people to hold

¹³⁷ Berber Bevernage and Koen Aerts, “Haunting Pasts: Time and Historicity as Constructed by the Argentine Madres de Plaza de Mayo and Radical Flemish Nationalists,” *Social History* 34, no. 4 (November 1, 2009): 393, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03071020903256986>.

¹³⁸ Bevernage and Aerts, “Haunting Pasts,” 397.

¹³⁹ Bellucci, “Childless Motherhood: Interview with Nora Cortiñas, a Mother of the Plaza de Mayo, Argentina,” 84.

¹⁴⁰ Agosin, *The Mothers of Plaza de Mayo*, 66.

governments accountable and to come up with the solutions for holding the military dictatorship responsible.¹⁴¹ Even if the Mothers wanted other things and wanted to fight for the resolution of a different issue, they used this focused goal as a tactic. Importantly, this is not to say that they never thought of anything else or had strong beliefs about other things but that they recognized the power they held if their argument was tight and seamless.

As discussed in the previous section, the Mothers claimed to have no intentions of entering the political field with a political purpose. This was a tactic to mitigate some of the violence they would have faced from the military for outright political organizing. While this was already discussed, it is important to bring a new light to the topic that informed much of their organizing. The Mothers claimed to always remain hopeful beyond their actions and highlighted how some of them had no time to mourn but for others, all they could do was mourn in ways that did not require the return of their children. Others began constant work so they could sleep at night, they just wanted to do something to address their role as those responsible for grieving.¹⁴² This relates to the importance of political activism and the associated fear.¹⁴³ In relation back to the role of identity and the simplicity of this goal, Renée Epelbaum highlighted how they “founded the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo without any political goals,” they wanted their message to be at the forefront of the movement and they used their positions as mothers strategically to present this goal.¹⁴⁴ Overall, the fast and expansive growth that characterizes this organization was possible, at least in part, because they remained focused on one clear goal of getting their children back.

¹⁴¹ Agosin, *The Mothers of Plaza de Mayo*, 70, 72, 79.

¹⁴² De Bonafini and Sánchez, “The Madwomen at the Plaza de Mayo,” 7.

¹⁴³ Di Marco and Alvarez, “The Mothers and Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo Speak,” 99-100.

¹⁴⁴ Agosin, *The Mothers of Plaza de Mayo*, 39.

Evolution of their Goal

The goal of the Mothers changed over time, especially after the end of the military dictatorship in Argentina when they were able to expand their goal slightly. As the Mothers gained more support in 1983 with the end of the reign of the dictatorship, they said that they would achieve a more peaceful society by remembering the disappeared and because the best way to remember is to dedicate yourself to human rights.¹⁴⁵ The group was able to expand in other ways but remained in line with their original goal until 1986 when the group split into two, with one faction more concerned with the aftermath of the dictatorship and remaining true to their original objectives and the other faction more concerned with continuing the progressive work of their children. In this divide, the Mothers certainly lost a significant portion of their cohesive image and strength as an organization because they became divided on the goal and their common identity was not sufficient for maintaining their connection.

In considering the evolution of the goal of the faction that wished to continue the work of their children, Renée Epelbaum explained that all of her children and most of their friends were involved in community work. One of her sons was a doctor and was “involved in a non-violent, political group called The Working Youth,” a group that “discussed ways to help in poor neighbourhoods and to promote literacy.”¹⁴⁶ In an interview, one of the Mothers highlighted how they all knew who was disappeared, which meant they did not want a list of who was disappeared, nor did they care to know exactly how these individuals were killed.¹⁴⁷ During the period of dictatorship, they wanted their children back, but because they knew this was not a realistic demand, they moved on to demanding the end to the military dictatorship and

¹⁴⁵ Agosin, *The Mothers of Plaza de Mayo*, 40, 44.

¹⁴⁶ Agosin, *The Mothers of Plaza de Mayo*, 61-62.

¹⁴⁷ Dujovne Ortiz, “The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo,” 25.

addressing other issues. Following the end of the dictatorship, this presented itself as the Mothers requesting things like the names of the military officials who were involved in the disappearances and the names of those who walked free with no consequences for the trauma they inflicted on the children. Evidently, this was a well-thought-out plan, they knew that their children were being disappeared or killed and they used their position as mothers to create a goal.

As described by Renée Epelbaum in one of the pieces the group wrote but which was not published in any newspaper, the Mothers continued to “wait for justice, we continue to fight for life and for freedom, we continue to say NO to the ‘final point’ NO to ‘obedience to superiors’ NO to impunity,” and their position remained clear throughout their protest even as it became more removed from the original goal of getting their children back.¹⁴⁸ The “final point” and “obedience to superiors” were terms used by the military dictatorship in attempts to enforce their power and their removal of autonomy from the people. These terms were also used in an attempt to absolve some of the military leaders of responsibility for the Dirty War and the disappearances when they were put on trial. Following the end of the military rule, the Mothers also wanted to know which Argentines supported the silence that the military dictatorship demanded. Furthermore, they worked to highlight how their own message was wide-reaching and all-encompassing as “this banner of the Mothers is not just our banner anymore, it is the banner of the Argentine people.”¹⁴⁹ This theme of collective efforts was integral to the group’s success and the way they approached the fight for justice.

Related to their role as mourners and several years following the end of the military regime, many of the Mothers did not want forensic anthropologists to dig up bodies because the

¹⁴⁸ Agosin, *The Mothers of Plaza de Mayo*, 65, 90, 91.

¹⁴⁹ Agosin, *The Mothers of Plaza de Mayo*, 69.

memory of death would close off the past.¹⁵⁰ The Mothers, according to historians Berber Bevernage and Koen Aerts, “probably better than anyone else, have a perfect understanding of the close link that, within the modern regime of historicity, exists between death as a metaphor for the past... [and] fearing that the ontologically inferior status ascribed to the ‘dead past’... could facilitate the neglect of historical injustice and indirectly legitimate the reign of impunity,” and this resistance against metaphors for death has been one of the primary strategies that the Mothers used to develop their new goals, especially as the dust settled after the fall of the dictatorship.¹⁵¹

Moving even further in time away from the end of the military dictatorship, some of the Mothers claimed that they were “for everything that represents women’s rights: the right to hold public office, have economic and social responsibilities, intervene in society beside men, and not be subjugated, mistreated, discriminated against,” expanding their goals as they gained more attention and felt they could detach themselves slightly from the original goal.¹⁵² Some of them wanted to demonstrate to women the knowledge of their rights and acknowledgement from men recognizing women for their equality.¹⁵³ Furthermore, while they may not have been members of a political party, they discussed human rights extensively, especially as they became more separated from their originally-presented goal of returning the disappeared.¹⁵⁴

Hebe de Bonafini highlighted how the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo were founded to fight for human rights and how they continued to do so in different ways as the time went on. For example, she highlighted how, following the fall of the military dictatorship, their priorities

¹⁵⁰ Bevernage and Aerts, “Haunting Pasts,” 398.

¹⁵¹ Bevernage and Aerts, “Haunting Pasts,” 405.

¹⁵² Di Marco and Alvarez, “The Mothers and Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo Speak,” 109.

¹⁵³ Di Marco and Alvarez, “The Mothers and Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo Speak,” 109.

¹⁵⁴ Agosin, *The Mothers of Plaza de Mayo*, 26-27.

broadened to the fight against unemployment and poverty, issues that were not much different from what their children were disappeared for short years ago.¹⁵⁵ She said that she knew she was radical “the Mothers always ask for the maximum, and what is the maximum that we ask for: to have justice, to maintain principles and to live with ethics,”¹⁵⁶ which remain consistent with the simple message they presented at the beginning of their organizing. They went from thinking about modes of resistance to strategies of attack, again demonstrating active thinking and strategic framing, to develop a true movement.¹⁵⁷ One of their goals, extended from the original, is that they would keep up their activities with the change of government because they felt strongly that people need to hold governments accountable as evidenced through their actions over the course of the military dictatorship.¹⁵⁸ They also tried to encourage others and they did come up with solutions for holding the military dictatorship responsible such as through their demands for a truth commission and trials for the officials involved in the military dictatorship.¹⁵⁹

Their Goal and Identity

While the specific message and common goal of this organization has been discussed, it is also important to consider the value of having this simple message and goal. Some of the Mothers have highlighted how they did not actually always have a lot in common except for this goal. They were united not necessarily in political beliefs or religious beliefs, but by tragedy.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁵ Sims, “Buenos Aires Journal; The Rock, Unyielding, Of the Plaza De Mayo.”

¹⁵⁶ Sims, “Buenos Aires Journal; The Rock, Unyielding, Of the Plaza De Mayo.”

¹⁵⁷ Norman, “The Mothers of Plaza de Mayo: ‘We Are No Longer Alone,’” 2:52.

¹⁵⁸ Agosin, *The Mothers of Plaza de Mayo*, 72.

¹⁵⁹ Agosin, *The Mothers of Plaza de Mayo*, 72; Nora Amalia Femenía and Carlos Ariel Gil, “Argentina’s Mothers of Plaza de Mayo: The Mourning Process from Junta to Democracy,” *Feminist Studies* 13, no. 1 (1987): 9–18, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3177832>.

¹⁶⁰ Bellucci, “Childless Motherhood: Interview with Nora Cortiñas, a Mother of the Plaza de Mayo, Argentina,” 86.

Again, they were not intentionally formed with a goal from the beginning, though quickly developed one, they were all coming from different cultural, religious, economic, and political backgrounds just wanting to search for their children and grandchildren.¹⁶¹ Maternal identity was so integral to this group that they became divided on how motherhood should be viewed: as public or private in addition to considering how their role in politics would continue once the military dictatorship had ended.¹⁶² As noted, the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo split into two groups, with one seeing motherhood as personal while the other sees it as public.¹⁶³

I want to devote a short section to discuss the body and the physical components of the protest of the Mothers. There is no doubt that part of the power of their protest was their presence, the embodiment of resistance to the military dictatorship. Another element to consider is that of the gendered body and how, in this case, the gendered bodies of the Mothers assisted their fight. Something important here is to seriously question what it means to have a gendered body during times of war. Often, when the physical body is discussed during times of war, it is focused on injuries to bodies but this understanding of violence and war as experience avoids the focus on injury.¹⁶⁴ Building on this, Sylvester considers what it would mean to frame war in the lens of feminist studies wherein “war is a set of experiences that everyday people and elites have physically, emotionally, and social-ethically, depending on their locations inside and even far beyond war zones,”¹⁶⁵ which is important, especially in a case like this where most of the violence that was undertaken surrounded the injuring and disappearing of bodies.¹⁶⁶ This also relates to Elaine Scarry's argument that “the content of war is human injury, which is an

¹⁶¹ Di Marco and Alvarez, “The Mothers and Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo Speak,” 97.

¹⁶² Orozco Mendoza, “Maternal Activism,” 1-6; Pieper Mooney, “Militant Motherhood Re-Visited,” 984.

¹⁶³ Orozco Mendoza, “Maternal Activism,” 3.

¹⁶⁴ Christine Sylvester, *War as Experience: Contributions from International Relations and Feminist Analysis*, 86, Routledge, <https://doi-org.login.ezproxy.library.ualberta.ca/10.4324/9780203100943>.

¹⁶⁵ Sylvester, *War as Experience*, 65.

¹⁶⁶ Sylvester, *War as Experience*, 66.

experiential realm of politics,”¹⁶⁷ indicating the value in protest with the body against human injury. Overall, I argue that the Mothers made use of their physical bodies by marching, taking up space in the political centre of the city, and by resisting the physical violence that was brought upon them by the military officials who tried to have them removed from the Plaza. From this, it becomes clear that the body can be used as a form of resistance in political turmoil, indicating that the body is not just a weapon or something that can be victimized.

This method of prioritizing the values of the movement over the identity of each individual who informs or makes up the movement is similar to the concept of transversalism, and this can help to understand the core elements of the organization. Transversalism provides a framework for approaching conflict resolution dialogue by allowing space for coalition between individuals who can remain informed by their diverse identities without allowing these identities to take over. “Transversal dialogue should be based on the principles of rooting and shifting - that is, being centred in one’s own experiences while being empathetic to the differential positionings of the partners in dialogue, thus enabling the participants to arrive at a different perspective from that of hegemonic tunnel vision,”¹⁶⁸ evidently this is a valuable approach because it limits the threat of individual identities overpowering the collective goal. In the case of the Mothers, they followed this approach to dialogue to inform their goal and to avoid it being overtaken by the priority of one individual or another. From this, “the boundaries of the dialogue would be determined by the message rather than its messengers,”¹⁶⁹ indicating—in this case—that the goal the Mothers presented of wanting their children returned overrode the individual concerns they held or presented to the group.

¹⁶⁷ Sylvester, *War as Experience*, 114.

¹⁶⁸ Nira Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation: SAGE Publications*, London: SAGE Publications, 1997; 88, ProQuest Ebook Central.

¹⁶⁹ Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation*, 88.

It is important to note that this is not to say that the Mothers were not informed by their identity, in fact it was the opposite, as demonstrated in the previous chapter. This is to say that they prioritized their goals over how they felt as individual actors. As discussed by Yuval-Davis, drawing on Elsa Barkley Brown, “the process of shifting should not involve self-decentering, that is losing one’s own rooting and set of values,”¹⁷⁰ which is key for allowing one’s identity to remain intact and inform one’s efforts without overpowering the efforts of others. In relation, “the transversal coming together should be not with the members of the other group *en bloc*, but with those who, in their different rooting, share values and goals compatible with one’s own,”¹⁷¹ indicating that working with people of similar values should be prioritized over working with people by grouping everyone in opposition to one’s own point of view together. This was one of the key reasons and ways the Mothers were able to overcome their differences, such as opposing opinions on the status of women’s healthcare or the value in a fight for equal job access for women or other issues that would normally be polarizing and could threaten the stability of the organization. While each of the Mothers did not agree with each other on various political issues or societal concerns, they were able to recognize that they had a commonality among them and by focusing on their common effort, they could wield more power and influence. They prioritized this goal over their own identities for the chance at greater success.

While much of the work the Mothers accomplished cannot be clearly defined by transversal politics, the ability to move past one's own identity to sympathize and act with someone of a different identity remained core to their fight.¹⁷² The Mothers evidently had commonalities in their lived experiences and their worldviews as mothers brought them together,

¹⁷⁰ Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation*, 130.

¹⁷¹ Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation*, 130.

¹⁷² Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation*, 130.

but this did not mean they always held the same political values or interests. From this, it is clear that the basis of the Mothers organizing was carefully negotiated to create a shared objective, it was not simply a natural development that is linked to being mothers. In contrast to some beliefs, they did not leave their identities, but remained situated in their diverse lived experiences and elements that made up each of their unique identities and they transcended these differences to push for the same goal. In many cases, they chose to incorporate this goal into their individual identities as well, though not always. This is important because it differs from the identity aspects they had no say in, for example the gender roles they often fulfilled with little room for negotiation or class status, which was virtually impossible to change in large ways.¹⁷³ This also relates to how each of the mothers had to develop their own sense of identity, and while some, or a lot, of these elements may have been rooted in their sense of maternal identity, in order to come together in such a cohesive way, they needed an additional goal—a connective element.

What Is Left Out

When considering the initial goal of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, it is important to consider what was left out of this goal. Many of the Mothers held the goal of an equitable society that their children were working for along the lines of Marxist, Peronist, or other movements. These goals of an equitable society among other social objectives, however, were intentionally left out of the presented message. Prior to the reign of the military, Perón made deals with the working class but when these promises were not held up, many members of the working class turned against him and contributed to his ousting.¹⁷⁴ This led to the decline of the Argentine

¹⁷³ Nira Yuval-Davis, "Theorizing Identity: Beyond the 'Us' and 'Them' Dichotomy," *Patterns of Prejudice* 44, no. 3 (July 1, 2010): 278, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0031322X.2010.489736>.

¹⁷⁴ Abreu Hernandez, "The Mothers of La Plaza de Mayo," 391.

government as the military became aggressive to “stabilize” and “re-establish social order,” indicating the importance of class and equitable society to all aspects of life in Argentina.¹⁷⁵ The decision made by the Mothers to remain focused on the one goal of needing their children back cemented the Mothers in their maternal identities and maternal roles. This gave them an advantage because they were able to rely on stereotypes about women and mothers that assumed they lacked any political or critical thinking skills that prevented them, for the most part, from being outwardly attacked by military officials. To succeed in this effort, however, they were essentially restricted to the claim of wanting their disappeared children returned.

Over twenty years after the end of the military dictatorship in Argentina but in the midst of a politically unstable period, Tati, one of the Mothers, said that “the Mothers don’t want this democracy, we want a more participatory democracy in which human rights will be respected.”¹⁷⁶ Many of the Mothers have highlighted how their children were involved in the battle for education, healthcare, equal wages, and other social justice issues that were prevalent in Argentina in the lead-up to the military regime.¹⁷⁷ Those who wished to continue the work of their children stuck more strongly to the claim that they were reborn in political consciousness and asked themselves what their children would do moving forward—the same ideas that contributed to the eventual split of the organization.¹⁷⁸ In relation, they wanted to continue what their children had attempted to do and understood that their children, or many of them, were involved in helping those in need and wanted to help build an equitable society.¹⁷⁹ The Mothers often highlight how their children were kind and compassionate, people who helped those in

¹⁷⁵ Abreu Hernandez, “The Mothers of La Plaza de Mayo,” 392.

¹⁷⁶ Burchianti, “Building Bridges of Memory,” 145.

¹⁷⁷ Fisher, *Mothers of the Disappeared*, 20.

¹⁷⁸ Burchianti, “Building Bridges of Memory,” 142.

¹⁷⁹ Burchianti, “Building Bridges of Memory,” 145.

poverty and dreamers about the future that Argentina could have—a future that helped people in need.¹⁸⁰

Despite its obvious prevalence, class has been a theme that is constantly left out of the literature surrounding the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo. It is an important one to consider because as noted through some of their other priorities, it was one of the elements that tied the Mothers together. There were other movements for human rights occurring during the military regime in Argentina, but these were usually reserved for the upper class or wealthy elites, leaving the working-class with limited options. This is important because class also relates to the theme of nonviolence because nonviolence is understood to provide pragmatic benefits and maintains the moral authority of the poor by ensuring the movement is more accessible, as was the case for the Mothers.¹⁸¹ Class is also an important theme in reference to the disappeared because many of the Mothers' children were involved with class-focused projects and often belonged to the middle or working classes themselves, fighting against issues that resonate with the working class.¹⁸² There was also the issue of finance, this was especially relevant if it was a man who was making money that was abducted, placing an even larger burden on the Mother and relating to how class was a unifying element as many of the Mothers had similar experiences with these sorts of issues.¹⁸³

Interestingly, over the course of the dictatorship, the Mothers and the state-employed workers union who were protesting economic cuts, walked together, indicating class ties but which is also important because it prevented the Mothers and their wishes from being situated in

¹⁸⁰ Burchianti, "Building Bridges of Memory," 145.

¹⁸¹ Abreu Hernandez, "The Mothers of La Plaza de Mayo," 399.

¹⁸² Fisher, *Mothers of the Disappeared*, 13-31, chapter 8.

¹⁸³ Fabj, "Motherhood as a Political Voice," 3.

the past.¹⁸⁴ Political mobilization through motherhood crosses ethnic, class, and racial divides and because many working-class women were a part of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, forming the bulk of the organization, this becomes especially relevant.¹⁸⁵ When considering what Mothers were doing for work before they joined or formed the organization, it becomes clear that many of them were housewives or working in traditionally feminine jobs. In addition, many had fairly limited access to education, which resulted in lower education levels that impacted their class status.¹⁸⁶ The leaders of the organization have come from different class backgrounds, though they were for the majority members of the working-class—something that became especially apparent when the organization split into two factions.

Another thing I would like to consider is the removal of class status when entering the field of masculine politics.¹⁸⁷ In short, this refers to the idea that gender and class are so interconnected in the field of politics that in order to exist in this space without being attacked, the Mothers would have to appeal to those in power and how they saw the field of politics existing, including ideas of who could and who could not participate, at this time, ideas that belonged to the conservative right and those leaders of the military dictatorship. This removal of class status was apparent because the Mothers created an identity that was apolitical. As discussed, evidently they were not actually apolitical but were presenting as such because it appeased the elites. If the Mothers presented a feminine image, it was less threatening and fit the respectable class image of what a woman should do and how she should engage with society.¹⁸⁸ The majority of the Mothers were originally working-class from the beginning, and they became

¹⁸⁴ Burchianti, "Building Bridges of Memory," 134.

¹⁸⁵ Orozco Mendoza, "Maternal Activism," 4.

¹⁸⁶ Guzman Bouvard, *Revolutionizing Motherhood*, 1-17.

¹⁸⁷ Ana Peluffo, "The Boundaries of Sisterhood: Gender and Class in the Mothers and Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo," *A Contracorriente: Una Revista de Estudios Latinoamericanos* 4, no. 2 (December 1, 2007): 93.

¹⁸⁸ Peluffo, "The Boundaries of Sisterhood," 94.

unified under their working-class identity. This allowed their demands to be the focus of the organization and prevented them from being dismissed as too threatening. The fact that the majority of them were working-class was a unifying element and indicative of the power that these working-class women possessed in the group to be able to present this image of being entirely working-class.

Caring for their Goal

Many scholars that focus on the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo or those who focus more broadly on the involvement of women in the political realm such as Fabj, Orozco Mendoza, and Mooney among others, refer to the role of women in these spaces as entrances into a somehow foreign and unknown world. The so-called entry into the national field or stage is a major topic of discussion, but in the case of the Mothers, it was not really an entrance, but rather a reveal and a way to showcase this human rights work that was not new to the Mothers but that was undervalued or went unrecognized in many cases. The Mothers were, of course, responsible for constructing and sustaining the political realm in many ways, they just were not always in the light.¹⁸⁹ They remained mostly ignored because of gender stereotypes and society's perception of which spaces women could occupy.

Furthermore, there continues to be an overlap between the political stances of feminism and the nonviolence that was used by the Mothers.¹⁹⁰ Feminist nonviolent activists are committed to various philosophical and political stances but what is important here is that they have a commonality in that "their identity as women is central to their leadership as they address social and political injustices, especially those injustices that disproportionately impact women,"

¹⁸⁹ Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation*, 3.

¹⁹⁰ Poe, "Feminism and Nonviolent Activism," 268.

and while this is evidently an important topic to study, it is important to remember that the Mothers did not equate their nonviolent action to feminist efforts.¹⁹¹ As will be discussed in the following section, there is no intrinsic capacity of women to be nonviolent, but women may draw on their identities to participate in feminist nonviolence.¹⁹² Many scholars make note of this, that there is not some element that comes with motherhood, especially because motherhood can even be violent, clearly indicating an active choice in the presentation of their goals and organization as a whole and adding a further element of success to the Mothers.¹⁹³

Mothers in Argentina had private responsibilities as mothers that forced them to enter the public domain, which is not something that men can do in a state of terror. This is an important note because it aided in the success of the organization and demonstrates how the Mothers were able to use their maternal identities to form their goal and action plan, none of which would have been possible without this allowed “entry” into the political world. They possessed agency from militant motherhood and the traditional motherhood can be combined with the public, political protest. They were able to profit on this opportunity because of their role as mothers and because the military was considered to be entering the private domain as they disappeared thousands of children.¹⁹⁴ This clearly demonstrates their prior knowledge, how they were able to use their specific image—that of a caring mother and one that needs to mourn but is not able to do so because of the lack of body, information, or transparency—and present a specific goal of wanting their children back that is rooted in that image. This was not an act of naivety, but rather it was one that was well-thought out and systematically executed.

¹⁹¹ Poe, “Feminism and Nonviolent Activism,” 269.

¹⁹² Poe, “Feminism and Nonviolent Activism,” 269.

¹⁹³ Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995).

¹⁹⁴ Pieper Mooney, “Militant Motherhood Re-Visited,” 982-983.

The goal of care is relevant in this discussion because, at its core, the goal of the Mothers was to care for the community, they were working to fill a void and do what others in their society refused to, or simply could not do. Care ethics is considered to be a theoretical and practical approach to global security, and while this effort was on a somewhat smaller scale, to its principles, it remains true. When considering what it means to care, most scholars seem to conclude that caring is contextually dependent. There are, of course, the physical elements of caring for someone, such as a child by feeding or bathing them—often care that is associated with mothering.¹⁹⁵ There are also the psychological elements such as wanting someone to be safe and protected, which is what informed a lot of the movement of the Mothers, or at least that informed their image and the goal of the movement.¹⁹⁶

Care ethics is considered to be a “form of moral responsiveness that is curious about context and sees moral dilemmas through the prism of relationship,”¹⁹⁷ and while it is often critiqued as being essentializing of women and mothers, there is value in its theoretical approach to peacemaking. Care ethics in this sense builds upon work by Sara Ruddick about maternal thinking who claims that maternal thinking is a “discipline of maternal thought,”¹⁹⁸ meaning that it is a set of practices and a way of thinking that emerges from maternal practices in things such as caring for children and family or community members and then considering how these practices can then be taken and applied to different situations such as efforts to create peace, as is evidenced in the case of the Mothers.¹⁹⁹ This brings into question the critique of care ethics in that it supposedly reinforces paternalistic or gendered power relations and limits the ideas about

¹⁹⁵ Virginia Held, *The Ethics of Care : Personal, Political, and Global*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006; 29, EBSCOHost.

¹⁹⁶ Held, *The Ethics of Care*, 30.

¹⁹⁷ Fiona Robinson, “Feminist Foreign Policy as Ethical Foreign Policy? A Care Ethics Perspective,” Feb. 25, 2019, 34, <https://journals-sagepub-com.login.ezproxy.library.ualberta.ca/doi/full/10.1177/1755088219828768>.

¹⁹⁸ Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking*, 21.

¹⁹⁹ Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking*, 30.

who is permitted to care to only women and mothers. The Mother of the Plaza de Mayo provide a good way to look at escaping gender essentialism that often comes with discussions of care ethics because they used maternal thinking to care for their community during a time of violence and conflict by taking the skills many of them developed from raising children, such as the ability to prioritize, and applying these practices to peace efforts.

While maternal activism in the case of the Mothers is not always respected, especially radical feminists who think that maternal activists are reproducing the structures that keep them removed from politics in the first place or by misogynists who do not think women should have a voice in politics or activism, it is clear that maternal activism can be effective.²⁰⁰ What is most important for the development of my argument here is that from this understanding of care ethics and maternal thinking, these concepts are not restricted by gender. From its core with maternal thinking to the care ethics processes that are developed, these are not restricted by gender to women and mothers because it is a way of thinking and set of practices. Therefore, in theory, maternal thinking, and care ethics as they were used by the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo can be taken up by other groups fighting for peace efforts regardless of gender identity or claims to motherhood with no sort of hierarchical standing.

Consider how developing caring relations as the Mothers did, whether it was amongst themselves, between themselves and the national community, or between themselves and their children, the spread of caring networks might be considered the largest accomplishment with regards to care ethics and this case.²⁰¹ There was a security risk posed by the military dictatorship and it was met with an ethics of care approach from the Mothers.²⁰² Care ethics is

²⁰⁰ Orozco Mendoza, "Maternal Activism," 4.

²⁰¹ Held, *The Ethics of Care*, 42.

²⁰² Robinson, *The Ethics of Care*.

important for defining this movement and can help to understand this context because it provides moral and theoretical guidance to make sense of how the goal of the Mothers emerged and remained concise and effective.

Conclusion and Lasting Impacts

I would like to continue by considering how informed a group must be by their goal. As evidenced in my previous arguments and the actions of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, their goal of getting their children back informed their identity, image, and overall action plan over the course of the military dictatorship. I believe that this common goal is what allowed them to overcome some of their differences. As discussed above, the Mothers did not always possess the same political or religious beliefs—issues that tend to be quite polarizing and often divisive for group organization and peace efforts—but they were able to put these differences aside for their common objective. One of the reasons for this success is that their goal was simple and clear, so either Mothers wanted to be a part of the organization, or they did not, there was not any uncertainty or guesswork involved which preserved the authenticity of the organization.

This is not to say that focusing on one single goal for a long period does not come with its risks. The Mothers certainly faced a number of risks by focusing on this one goal of getting their children back. As previously mentioned, the Mothers did eventually divide themselves into two separate factions because, following the military dictatorship, they progressed to holding different desires and priorities that they now had the space and time to explore following the removal of most immediate threats and violence. Either they wished to continue with the efforts as organized around the goal of finding their children or they wished to push their efforts further to include other human rights and social justice elements such as women's rights, equal wages,

access to healthcare, and more. So, in this sense, I might draw the claim that focusing an organization for peace around one goal is not sustainable over a long period of time if maintenance of membership is also necessary. In another sense, the message of the Mothers was never questioned because it was so clear, but this also limited the scope of efforts they could focus on without going against the goal. During times of conflict, however, the goal might be concise because a group must prioritize what is the most effective and important thing to focus efforts.

Overall, this chapter has considered the goal of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo. While they built their protest around the goal of getting their children back from the military dictatorship who had disappeared them, their goal also evolved after the dictatorship had ended. Through the examination of the Mothers' presentation their goal in a simple way, the expansion of their goal at the end of the dictatorship, the link they formed between their goal to their identities, the elements that were intentionally left out of their goal, the role of caring for each other and their communities, and finally the lasting implications of their goals, it is clear why the Mothers were able to remain strong and secure as an organization despite the immense challenges they faced.

Conclusion and Analysis

In conclusion, this thesis has considered the existing research surrounding the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo with the application of a contemporary lens including new frameworks and theories. While conflict resolution resulting from women and mothers is not new, it is often overlooked but deserving of deliberation. I have argued that there is some linking quality of motherhood through maternal identity and the creation of a shared common objective which allows for success in the fight for peace. Evident in this case and as became clear through analysis of the primary sources, the creation of an identity of a Mother of the Plaza de Mayo and a clear common goal that was shared amongst the members of this organization. From this, consider that the same idea can be applied to other situations because whatever these qualities are, they can be applied to other movements and are crucial to the success of these other organizations. I have examined qualities from a specific maternal identity to religious beliefs to explain this connection. Additionally, as I have defined motherhood on a case basis, it has allowed me to explore why motherhood remains an effective political tool and highlight why it is relevant to the current political context.

I will conclude this work by looking at how the Mothers were able to be successful through their maternal identity and their common goal. Maternal identity in the case of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo is undoubtedly complex, but the practice of motherhood as care prepared the Mothers for this protest and, as they argued, they had no choice but to use their maternal identity to resist the horrors of the military dictatorship. In examining the relationship between motherhood and feminism, the creation and sustenance of a common identity, the role of *marianismo* and religion, and maternal thinking as it relates to political strategy, it became evident that maternal identity was crucial to the success of the Mothers. Furthermore, the goal of

the Mothers was central to their protest and demands to have their disappeared children returned. The consideration of how the Mothers presented their goal in a simple fashion, the evolution of this goal following the demise of the dictatorship, the connection the Mothers formed between their goal and identities, the elements that were omitted from their goal, the function of care, and the lasting implications of this goal, allowed me to explore why the Mothers needed this to succeed.

There is often a desire from scholars to highlight how this case of the Mothers organizing is unique in its success, but it is crucial to note that this case is one among many because motherhood has consistently been a compelling political platform to challenge militant states as women organizing protests “through the discourse of mothering, especially during times of perceived crisis, they are able to tap into culturally salient and powerful meanings and representations attached to maternal suffering.”²⁰³ I think there are aspects of the Mothers’ organization that could be applied to other efforts, I do not think their framework of dependence on their identity or their goal is non-replicable and therefore, could be pushed forward into the realm of peace efforts more generally.

While a common identity is essential to the success of an effort for peace, I do not think it necessarily is a requirement seeing as it must connect with the common goal. Goals are, of course, essential to the success of a peace effort and I think the simple presentation that the Mothers used is a good tactic. When these components work together, a peace effort has the best chance at success. The Mothers had a very specific goal and existed in a very unique situation during the military dictatorship. Nonetheless, they have inspired other groups across Latin America and around the world, those who depend on motherhood and those who do not to fight

²⁰³ Burchianti, “Building Bridges of Memory,” 141.

for their rights and safety. I would also like to touch on the role of motherhood more broadly as a tool for conflict resolution and highlight how, by breaking down this specific case, it is clear that there is an element to this approach that can be used without depending specifically on mothers themselves.

The focus on motherhood in this specific history is also enduring, hinting at the literature that shifts with new ideas and theories and which leaves room to expand—I suggest perhaps expansion to discussions of class and religion that have been minimal. The intersections of class, religion, and gender are crucial for a comprehensive understanding of this case and with these missing components, it is difficult to draw any full conclusions. As evidenced throughout this paper, the class of the Mothers helped them to remain connected as they were left with few options for organizing and were forced together based on this component of their lived experience. As for their religious beliefs, consider everything from the prevalence of Catholicism among the Mothers to their meeting in churches to the exclusion of Jewish mothers based upon cultural understandings of *marianismo*. The intersections of these experiences and characteristics worked to connect the Mothers on a deep level that would have been virtually impossible had they not shared these commonalities. As Hankivsky suggests, is also valuable to consider how care ethics can be brought into conversation with intersectionality because care ethics is not seen as inherently intersectional.²⁰⁴ In this case, this helps to consider how religious affiliation and class and gender are all co-constructed, they are not simply interacting but rooted independently of each other. This approach also allows an adequate addressing of how the differences in

²⁰⁴ Olena Hankivsky, “Rethinking Care Ethics: On the Promise and Potential of an Intersectional Analysis,” *American Political Science Review* 108 , no. 2 (May 2014): 252, 10.1017/S0003055414000094.

maternal activism came out of different ways of caring. An intersectional care framework also highlights how, even within the same class or religion, the Mothers maintained differences.²⁰⁵

Furthermore, as protests of motherhood as an essentializing descriptor inspired re-definitions of motherhood as an institution, as a practice, and as one identifying factor among a multitude, the re-evaluation of traditional values associated and an assessment of politicized motherhood acts as a lasting force that shapes the political arena.²⁰⁶ I would like to conclude by considering the value of having a common goal in organizing for human rights or peace efforts. As evidenced through the case of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, their maternal identities and common goal was what drew them together initially and what allowed them to be successful in their sustained protest, indicating the effectiveness of this approach for other peace efforts.

²⁰⁵ Hankivsky, "Rethinking Care Ethics," 256.

²⁰⁶ Pieper Mooney, "Militant Motherhood Re-Visited," 986.

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