No Justice, No Peace: The Women of Argentina and Chile’s Long-Term Mobilization

By Emily McGranachan

M.A.
Ethics, Peace and Global Affairs
School of International Service
American University

INTRODUCTION

During the military dictatorships in Argentina and Chile thousands of people were illegally detained and disappeared by military forces. Out of desperation and despair mothers, grandmothers, and other loved ones of the disappeared began to gather, demonstrate, and eventually demand justice. Mothers and grandmothers of the disappeared are best known from the work of Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo and Las Abuelas de la Plaza de Mayo in Argentina. In Chile, La Agrupación de los Familiares de los Detenidos/Desaparecidos (henceforth the AFDD) is the best-known family organization. For decades they have relentlessly brought attention to the crimes of the military regimes and have demanded the safe return of all the disappeared. While at first glance these two countries and different groups have many similarities, the methodologies, ideologies, and trajectories of the groups are divergent and at times oppositional. Though the years, however, the human rights discourse that is a fundamental identity of the organizations and the members has remained central.

RESEARCH QUESTION

The varied reactions, adjustments, and development of similar organizations that formed for the same reasons raise questions as to why and how the groups differ. How do members of the groups explain their mission and methodology during and after the transition to democracy?
What role does the frustrated reconciliation processes play in the ways the groups reacted to the transition to democracy? Through the publications, testimonies, and writings of the core members of the groups, this paper examines the paths of three major family of the disappeared organizations and their very different trajectories over the past several decades.

**METHODOLOGY**

This paper is based on a “most-difference case” paired structured comparison of organizations of women-led family of the disappeared in Chile and Argentina: similar cases with different processes leading to different outcomes (Tarrow 2010). By comparing two countries and three organizations there can be a deeper understanding of the complexities of the cases of Argentina and Chile.¹ In both cases, right wing military coups toppled democratic regimes, disappearing thousands of civilians who had supported the previous governments or participated in left wing parties, student organizations or guerrilla groups. In both countries family members of the disappeared organizations were the first to publically oppose the regimes. Yet their experiences greatly differed. In Chile, the AFDD was protected by the church and became part of a mass movement against the regime.² The women of Argentina, on the other hand, had no

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¹ In 1986 Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo separated into two distinct groups, la Asociación de las Madres de Plaza de Mayo and las Madres Plaza de Mayo Línea Fundadora (henceforth referred to as Asociación de Madres and Línea Fundadora).

² The Agrupación de Familiares de Detenidos Desaparecidos (AFDD) was formally organized in 1974 under the auspices of the Comité de Cooperación para la Paz en Chile, formed by Catholic and Lutheran religious leaders in Santiago as a human rights organization in the immediate aftermath of the coup. It was shut down by the military government in 1976. Then the Catholic Church, under the leadership of Cardinal Raúl Silva Henríquez, established the Vicaría de la Solidaridad.
umbrella organization or protector to host their activism. They were open and exposed to state threats and violence, even as they worked collectively to demand the lives of their children.³

This paper utilizes primary resources of interviews, testimonies, and publications by the women-led organizations to examine how the members perceived of the groups’ mission and human rights discourse. Spanish texts have been translated by me, as have the personal interviews I conducted with the women in January 2014.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

Pinochet’s dictatorship in Chile lasted from 1973 until 1990 and military rule in Argentina lasted from 1976 to 1983. During that time over 3,000 people were killed in Chile and hundreds of thousands were illegally detained, tortured, imprisoned, and exiled (Stern xxi). Though the official government numbers state that in Argentina 10,000 people were disappeared, the commonly used and widely accepted number is 30,000. In both countries the majority of those disappeared were men under 35, though in Argentina 30% of the disappeared were women. The resistance of the family members of those disappeared has remained strong despite all odds, threats, and decades of change.

Social movements and social movement organizations often persist and even thrive over long periods of time. From inception, to action, to readjustments and declines, a social movement organization can fluctuate in its mobilization over the course of decades. When seeking to study the women-led organizations of Chile and Argentina some major theories of political opportunity and framing are useful, but ultimately not sufficient in and of themselves to understand the groups.

³ On December 10, 1977, two days after the abduction of two other Madres, Esther Ballestrino de Careaga and Maria Eugenia Ponce de Bianco, Azucena Villafor, group leader, was also disappeared by the authorities.
Cycles of Social Movements

According to the theory of political opportunity structure, social movements, understood in this paper as “sustained, conflictual interaction between social challenges and opponents”, are cyclical in nature (Tarrow, 1989, 18, original italics). Because the environment in which social movements organize changes, and because movements sometimes either win or are defeated, periods of widespread protest are often followed by periods of dormancy, creating a cyclical pattern shaped by negotiations, concessions, or regime change.

The transition to democracy alters the political and civic situation, thus social movement and human rights groups have to navigate new roles. Since constitutional democracies legitimize the state “…social movements lose their pre-eminent role as defenders and promoters of legal and political rights,” thus forcing them to either join the existing political system or to carve out a new space for themselves removed from power (Foweraker 105). The social movement groups, in order to remain independent, have to distinguish themselves from the mainstream political organizations.

Political opportunity theory views social movements as heavily dependent on the open or closed nature of a society. A social movement organization that formed at the peak of repression in a closed society, like those studied here, counters this theory. These organizations in Chile and Argentina organized protests despite the political opportunity at the time, not because of it. Political opportunity structure therefore is not useful in explaining the counter pattern. The organizations withstood the downturn in the cycle of protest as the country moved from closed dictatorship to a more open democracy in the late 1980s and early 1990s. They were able to adjust without being coopted by the new government or the traditional political parties that were allowed to once again dominate the political sphere.
One way the women’s movement in South American countries maintained independence was through a confrontational discourse after the return of democracy rather than “… adapting to the ordinary requirements of democratic politics, which call for negotiation and bargaining” in an attempt to avoid “… abandoning their ideals and principles” (Feijoó 109-129). These social movement organizations often opened themselves up to collaborations, partnerships, and radicalization outside of mainstream politics and civil society as a means to avoid co-option.

In the case of Chile, where the AFDD was part of a larger social movement demanding the end of the Pinochet regime, democracy may have been the principle demand of the movement, but it was not the final goal of the AFDD. In both countries, democracy was seen as a means to an end for the family of the disappeared groups. Democracy held the hope for meaningful trials, truth, and justice. For the broader social movements and the dormant political parties, democracy was the demand and the fact that it was obtained through careful military concessions and negotiation was less of a concern. In the end the transition to democracy left the family of the disappeared groups frustrated, alienated, and unwilling to be absorbed by the society at large.

**New Frames**

If some social movement organizations are able to remain independent of the political structure, while remaining true to their original goals and nonviolent, then something must sustain and enable their continued organizing. In her article, “The Mature Resistance of Argentina’s Madres de Plaza de Mayo” in *Latin American Social Movements*, Elizabeth Borland offers a theory of collective action framing as an explanation for social and political adjustments following the transition to democracy. Through new frames or a reframing, social movement groups are able to remain relevant and active thanks to growth and development in the original
goals. Borland defines goal expansion as “...a shift in the direction, geographic scope, or number of original goals held by a movement” (Borland 115-130). Original goals may not change dramatically; rather they become broader to include new aspects. Goal expansion is able to occur with successful frame realignments. According to Borland, “Frame alignment is an ongoing process by which social movement actors link their claims to interested audiences, often to strategically construct more resonant and persuasive frames that will mobilize people” (Borland 115-130). Frame alignment is an essential part of the development and sustainability of a social movement organization.

To remain relevant, social movement organizations need to be adept in “...in creating a resonance between the culture of their mass base and their own ideologies and strategies...” The active role of social movement organizations is critical in framing new codes of meaning, placing new ideological packages before the public and challenging elites and authorities with new models of collective action” (Tarrow, 1989, 15). One way to do this is for older social movement organizations to identify commonalities with new movements and to mobilize separately, but in congruence with the newer movements. Not only are groups able to adapt strategically, but they are also capable of using their maturity to their advantage as a source of legitimacy, prestige, and proof of their commitment (Borland 115-130). Having sufficiently adjusted so as to remain a relevant moral authority, some social movement organizations are able to expand their goals and engage in collective action over the course of many years.

While at first Borland’s theory of reframing seemed to link to the experience of the AFDD and Mothers, upon second view this connection is based on several false assumptions. Borland explains that social movement organizations reframe the issues they are seeking to address in order to remain relevant in a changing political reality and in order to form new
alliances. Along with reframing, groups also decide to expand their mission or goals. Borland proposes that groups make choices to ‘rebrand’ themselves, in a way and to rethink what they hope to achieve. It is clear from testimonies and publications that all three groups have connected justice for the disappeared with justice for all citizens from inception. This is not a new frame, or even a reframed idea, but rather a common one that is just articulated in a clearer manner. Though some of their language has changed somewhat over time, their core goals and values remain largely unaltered.

For the AFDD and Línea Fundadora their original three goals remain the same: lives/memory, truth, and justice. What was first and foremost a demand for the safe return of their loved ones has transitioned to remembering the disappeared as a way to never let such repression happen again. The return of their loved ones was always tied to justice and human rights, however. So though some of the language has changed over time, Línea Fundadora and AFDD both began with human rights language as central to their movements. La Asociación de las Madres, on the other hand, has developed the most to include anti-imperialism, anti-capitalism, and almost anarchistic ideology and discourse.

From the onset, the members of each group embraced a multifaceted and interconnected mission that sought to address both personal and collective repressions. For example, the AFDD’s members worked in the shantytowns with other women and with children during the 1970s and 1980s and La Asociación de Madres used the slogan “Solidaridad y Lucha o Hambre y Represión” (“Solidarity and Fight or Hunger and Repression”) in the 1992 annual Marcha de la Resistencia. The members denounced all human rights abuses and chose to identify themselves as part of the broader social justice movement. While their goals have remained the same, the way in which they frame their relevance has adjusted as the political landscape altered. These
activists participate in each new generation of human rights because such discourse has been part of their mission and self-identification from the beginning.

With no resolution to their initial fight, the women not only have stuck with their original demands, but they have interpreted them to organically include a variety of human rights issues. For example, Gabriela Zúñiga of the AFDD explained that they naturally support the LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer) rights movement because the women ask themselves, “How many of our detained-disappeared were gay?” (Zúñiga). Their lives were taken and the truth about their deaths remain a mystery, so with no clear answer to that question, the women feel compelled to support inclusive human rights movements. La Asociación de Madres and Línea Fundadora in Argentina similarly support diverse social justice and human rights movements, including LGBTQ rights.

Political opportunity structure theory and Borland’s concept of framing both do not entirely explain the women-led movements. What is left out is the strong motivator of frustrated aims and unfinished work. Their work is ongoing, their fight is not won, and so many women feel compelled to continue their activism as members of these organizations even forty or thirty years on. To understand how the women understood their motivations to continue to agitate after the transition to democracy one must look to the words of the women themselves.

**Voices of the Women**

Two primary frames are used to explain their discourse and longevity again and again in the testimony, both oral and written, and various publications of the women of Argentina and Chile. First, is the concept that the women are continuing the fight of their loved ones by supporting the issues their loved ones would have supported and continuing their revolutionary
work. Second, the women recognize that their original and fundamental goals, to see their loved ones returned alive and to get justice for their disappearance, have not yet been realized. With no resolution or conclusion to either their original mission or that of their disappeared loved ones, their fight continues and they cannot just give up.

_Baptized in Cruelty_

Most of the women who became members of the AFDD, Línea Fundadora, and las Madres, became politically and socially conscious in a meaningful way only after their loved one was detained or disappeared. This traumatic ‘awakening’ to the realities of the violence and injustice in society had a deep impact on the women. Inelia Hormosilla Silva lost her son, Héctor “Tito” Garay Hermosilla, when he was disappeared on July 8, 1974 in Chile. In an interview over a decade after the loss of her son she explained:

“The military coup woke up all the women, we were baptized by cruel reality: if we aren’t conscious of what is happening in our society, we run the risk of ending up disappeared and under the brutal dictatorship the rest of our lives. I never thought that I—a loving mother and homemaker […]—would end up in street protests, arrested and in jail, beaten, chained to buildings, in hunger strikes, or so many other things that I’ve done these last few years, only because they carried my son out of my life” (Sepúlveda 69).

Like most other women, Inelia Hermosilla Silva tied the tragedy of the disappearance of her son with the other tragedies and injustices being committed by the military regime. The scale of the repression became clearer as the women came together. It did not take long for women like Hermosilla Silva to conclude that to fight for the life of her son was to also fight for justice in society as a whole. This awareness of social injustices and connection with their personal loss influenced all three groups’ work throughout the dictatorship and into democracy.

In Chile the AFDD organized multifaceted and diverse protests that are a testament to their social justice work and their creativity in an extremely repressive atmosphere. From the
beginning the arpilleristas used their art to ‘speak’ out against the disappearances and the broad social injustices in Chile. Violeta Morales was an active member of the AFDD’s arpillera group, making tapestries that were smuggled out of the country and sold to help support the artists’ families and to spread their message of defiance. Morales explained, “We *arpilleristas* not only wanted to denounce the disappearances of our loved ones, but also want the people to know about the misery of our *companeras* living in the townships, and the huge abuses that the military was committing in our country. We wanted to shout to the world about the horrible offenses against human beings and about the assaults that were committed daily against the basic rights of individuals” (Agosin 91, italics original). Anita Rojas, another arpillerista, echoed Morales’ sentiments, “We also denounced other problems, not just our own: unemployment, the massacre of Lonquén, the shantytowns, how people live there, the soup kitchens, the closed factories, children begging…We are also concerned about the problems of other people, with all that we see and feel and show in the *arpilleras*” (Agosin 103, italics original). This creative protest outlet connected the AFDD to social justice and human rights struggles. The organization also took great risks when it publically demonstrated against the regime. By protesting the government while identifying themselves as family members of the disappeared, the AFDD publically make the connection between violent and structural repression. They rejected the idea that their search for their loved ones was isolated from the struggle of the poor and the survival of the country as a whole.

In Argentina, the Madres did not work as directly with the poor communities during the dictatorship. The women were not able to operate within the safety net of the church, like the AFDD in Chile. On their own and without a community outreach structure already developed, the women concentrated their efforts on public actions, international advocacy, and sustained
pressure on the government. Human rights discourse became key to international connections and legitimacy.

In January 2014 Evel ‘Bebe’ De Petrini, now seventy-nine years old and still an active member of La Asociación de las Madres, explained that the mission of the organization was and always had been to defend the problems of the people:

“After the disappearance of our children we went out in search of them. When a certain amount of time passed, and we realized that we were not going to find them as easily as we thought, we formed this organization…with the principle objective of continuing to look for those responsible for the disappearance of our children and moreover to fight for the objectives [the military] had not let [our children] accomplish: to fight for a better world, a more just world” (De Petrini).

The search for their children had a twofold impact on the consciousness of the Madres. First, the women were made brutally aware of the violence, injustice, and indignities all around them in Argentine society. From this awakening the women made the direct connection between their suffering and fight with that of other people dealing with issues of poverty, neglect, starvation, and abuse. These were the very issues their children had been trying to combat through their participation in political, labor, and social groups. As Bebe De Petrini and many others echo in their testimony, the women were determined to pick up the battle flag of their missing children and continue their fight.

*Unfinished Work*

Tying their personal quests to the broader human rights of all people positioned the family of the disappeared groups to remain active long past the return to democracy. Even after the military regimes in Chile and Argentina were removed from power, there remained many issues to be dealt with. In their testimonies and writing during democracy women touch on human rights issues from health and housing, to reproductive rights and police violence. Members saw their activism as upholding the memory of their lost loved ones through working
towards their pre-dictatorship goals for reform (Guzmán 163). Not only did their work towards a just and democratic society remain unfinished, but their original objective to locate their loved ones also remained unfinished.

The dictatorship in Argentina finally ended in 1983 with the election of President Alfonsín of the Radical Party. By this time most Madres held out hope that democracy would finally release the information they had been demanding about the whereabouts of their children and justice for the murders. This hope was soon dashed, as the transition and ‘reconciliation’ led by the government avoided the substantive parts of the Mother’s demands. The National Commission on Disappeared People, known as CONADEP (Comisión Nacional Sobre la Desaparación de Personas) was established in 1983 with the mandate to collect voluntary testimonies and records to establish the extent of disappearance during the Dirty War (Rigby 69). As one Madre, Carmen de Guede, put it, “CONADEP served to waste a year. This Commission did nothing more than reproduce all the information the human rights organizations already had” (Fisher 130). The Commission had no power to compel testimony from the military and or prosecute, as the Madres had publically demanded prior to the establishment of the commission. This same model of ‘truth commissions’ and weak judicial prosecutions of only some of the highest-level military officials was used seven years later in Chile. Additionally, both countries passed laws meant to limit prosecutions to only the highest military leaders (Due Obedience laws) and to stifle prosecutions all together with deadlines (Final Point laws). Consequently the organizations felt ignored by the democratic governments and angry at what they viewed as a lack of justice.

Speaking in the early years after the end of Pinochet regime, Inelia Hormosilla Silva shared the sentiments of many other survivors of the repression:
“I get furious when I think they’ll prolong the oblivion of their political crimes when they haven’t even given us our children’s bones so we can bury them. A ‘final point’…for whom? For the guilty? How can we have a final point if we don’t find the guilty and know what really happened in Chile during the years of the dictatorship?” (Sepúlveda 71, italics original).4

With no one identified as the perpetrators of the crimes, outside of the few highest-level authorities, the fight for truth and justice was indefinite. When it came to the few military trials that were conducted, Carmen de Guede, of Argentina, summarized the disappointment when she said, “It was good there was a trial but for us it was a parody of a trial” (Fisher 141). Any attempts for justice that were made were weak and almost meaningless for the women because the trials did not answer the questions of who, how, why, and where of the disappearance of their loved ones.

The transition to democracy was not only disappointing because of the lack of political will to prosecute those responsible. It also meant more of the same economic and social policies that the women and other human rights groups had fought against. New democratic governments maintained the neo-liberal economic policies of the dictatorships and politics remained dominated by elites. For Mirta Crocco, a social worker and professor of social work in Valparaiso, Chile who became involved with the Comité Pro-Paz in 1973, democracy was orchestrated to satisfy the economic and political pressure from the United States, which supported the neoliberal policies of the Pinochet regime. Speaking with the passion seen in the other testimonies she emphasized how the lack of any real change “makes [her] blood boil. And to see how we Chilean accept this ‘transition to democracy’ without questioning or analyzing the reality of the situation! There is a definite need for a new social movement denouncing this

4 Though Chile never passed a Final Point Law, which would have established a strict statute of limitations for bringing cases against the dictatorship and members of the military, it was often discussed as a path to reconciliation. A similar law was passed in Argentina in 1986.
“sham” (Maloof 160). In all the testimonies the women acknowledge that democracy had not brought about the political, social, and economic change they had worked so hard for and had tied to the toppling of the military regimes. This has only alienated the women from the mainstream political system.

Evidence of the lack of resolution to their original demands can be seen in the maintenance of the same original goals. The AFDD and Línea Fundadora in particular identify their principal mission as being what it had always been: first, to remember their loved ones, second, to demand the truth, and third, to demand justice. Though they were fighting against ‘a more subtle dictatorship’ in the 1990s with the ostensibly democratic governments, the AFDD still recognized Aylwin and his successors were better than the previous regime (Vega). With overwhelming frustration at the democratic governments over the course of almost twenty-five years, the AFDD continues its original work.

Línea Fundadora also holds to similar principles that though their work remains unfinished, they are able to work more closely with the democratic governments. The Asociación de las Madres, on the other hand, was much more hostile toward the democratic government, which was one of the causes of the split between the groups in 1986. For them, they had to continue to fight for a true democracy, which the Asociación believes was finally attained with the election of Néstor Kirchner in 2003 (De Petrini). Regardless of the tenuous relationships between the groups and the different democratic governments, the lack of meaningful justice, truth, and human rights protections remains. Unwilling and unable to retire, the women continue to hold the battle flag of their lost loved ones and to maintain their original demands.
CONCLUSION

The family of the disappeared organizations did not form and develop in a vacuum. Their relationships with institutions, political parties, and communities influenced their protests, alliances, and their interactions with the newly formed democracies. The groups have maintained and developed their original objectives as the political reality around them has changed with time. A crucial and transformational time for the groups was the transition to democracy and subsequent ‘reconciliation’ process. By not incorporating the demands of those most impacted by the repression, including survivors and their families, the state protected the military and very few of those responsible for the murder of tens of thousands were held accountable. This set up the family of the disappeared groups to stand in continued opposition of the government, though now of an elected one.

The extraordinary power and strength the women found through their activism and from one another have sustained their emotionally and physically draining activism for decades. Their membership composition, relationship with authorities (be them political or religious), and their support of radical ideology all influenced how the groups incorporated human rights discourse and methodology. Failed by the ‘reconciliation process’, all three groups believe their fight has not yet been won. They continue their demand for justice, truth, memory, and human rights.
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