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Strength in Motherhood: Latin America (Winner of the 2022 Janick Prize)

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Motherhood in Latin America began as a point of weakness and developed into a strength. The position of motherhood was a critical part of the social and political reform movements of the twentieth century. The abuse, repression, and displacement created by dictatorial regimes in twentieth century Chile, Argentina, Peru, and Brazil destroyed families. Mothers banded together, creating an impactful network of women that would fight against political and social abuse. They redirected the ideas of being a woman in society and redefined feminism from a Latin American perspective. These societies discriminated against women in ways that deprived them of economic and occupational opportunities, making the experience of being a woman and mother unique and particularly difficult. Many women were sexually assault and endured violence due to political instability. As women and mothers began sharing these experiences, they would develop a system of support networks for other women. Ideas of motherhood would be rediscovered and transformed throughout Latin America, creating a point of momentum for feminism and social change.

Patriarchal ideas within society bound women to the domestic world within the home throughout the twentieth century.[1] Textbooks and the broader society emphasized that mothers existed to care for children. This confinement restricted their access to education and awareness of political matters. During the dictatorial rule of General Augusto Pinochet, in Chile, education levels had decreased by seventy-three percent by 1975.[2] This was most significant for women. In the twelve major Latin American countries, 24 to 47 percent of women had some form of higher education.[3] In response, women were not expected, nor did they have the access or

[1] Linda Reif, "Women in Latin American Guerrilla Movements: a Comparative Perspective" *Comparative Politics* 18, no. 2 (1986): 147.
[2] Ashley Davis-Hamel, "Successful Neoliberalism?: State policy, Poverty, and Income Inequality in Chile." *International Social Science Review* 87, no. 3/4 (2012): 81.
[3] Reif., "Women in Latin America," 149.

knowledge, to be involved in different political matters.[4] In the same study of twelve different Latin American countries, almost 20 percent of women were involved in the labor force, where over half of men were.[5] Women that were involved in the labor force would continue to have the expectation of fulfilling domestic activities simultaneously. Two out of five women that reported to be involved in the labor force were working as domestic servants.[6] This type of work was physically taxing, time consuming, and usually paid very little. The fact that too few women had the ability to receive higher education and work dramatically affected their roles as mothers and how they were able to care for their families. However, these difficulties would contribute to the development of women-led reform movements across Latin America.

Economic and social standing would impact the participation of mothers in reform movements. There were major issues in the economy that took a large toll on mothers. They struggled to get jobs and were unable to support their children and families. In 1970s Chile, under Pinochet, the employment rate was very low, around fifty percent.[7] Children were dying of hunger and exposed to high rates of child prostitution.[8] Prior to Pinochet, under Allende, a milk program had been implemented to give mothers and their children a half a liter of milk per day; as well as prenatal care for pregnant women. However, when Pinochet took over in 1973, these resources were eliminated, along with other programs created to improve living conditions, including labor unions and labor laws.[9] Government expenses towards public housing also decreased by almost two thirds by 1975. The government continued to intensify this by reducing health services and access to education.[10] All government cuts would go against the domestic ideals that women had been held to. Mothers were expected to take care of the family and feed their children; however, due to the economic struggles they were forced to endure they were unable to. Since

[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Ibid., 151.
[7] Esty Dinur, "Chilean Women Resist Torture, Dictatorship." *Off Our Backs* 19, no. 5 (May 1989): 13.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Davis-Hamel, "Successful Neoliberalism," 81.
[10] Helen Safa, "Women's Social Movements in Latin America," *Gender and Society* 4, no. 3 (1990): 356.

women were exposed to significant hardships and abuse, they found that they needed to help each other, which formed strong bonds between mothers and women.

Eventually, these struggles would support their movements as they drew political strength from their roles as mothers. This would also begin to contribute and generate feminist ideas within Latin America. Women of the middle class were initially more represented in these movements. Generally, these women had greater access to the public sphere and political education/knowledge. As women of the working-class began to join these grassroots movements, it would represent increased political knowledge and awareness through this private sphere.[11] However, political and social reform movements truly began to gain momentum as mothers, wives, and sisters redefined the ideas of womanhood and motherhood as a powerful force to combat these societal issues.

In major Latin American cities, women would help families through comfort and support of victims. Many mothers were impoverished and needed help supporting their families and homes. *Comedores populares* were created to provide meals for families.[12] These were big, female-developed kitchens where mothers and families would support other mothers through their economic difficulties, abuse, and whichever individual struggles they experienced. Women from fifteen to fifty different households would assist in food preparation that provided resources and meals for these women. Networks often developed directly from women of the community or had help funding meals from churches and international groups like UNICEF- Peru.[13] By 1985, it is estimated that in Lima, Peru, about three hundred *comedores populares* were developed.[14] In other cities, such as Santiago, over one thousand operated.[15] These groups supporting women were crucial, for women and mothers would gain a point of strength in their identity emerging out of decades of struggle.

Sexual assault and violence would be prevalent among various Latin American regimes. Sexual torture was a tactic used by government forces to destroy families and take away a sense of womanhood.[16] Captured pregnant mothers were tortured and

[11] Reif., "Women in Latin America," 153.
[12] Safa, "Women's Social Movements in Latin America," 357.
[13] Ibid., 361.
[14] *Comedores populares are* canteens or soup kitchens.
[15] Safa, "Women's Social Movements in Latin America," 361.
[16] Ibid, 358-359.

killed, and many of their children were torn away from them.[17] Violence and assault within the domestic sphere was also widespread. Women of all socio-economic identities often experienced sexual assault; however, women that were in the work force and economically participating were often at an increased risk. This was influenced by the patriarchal society and the ideas of machismo, which would enforce an aggressive and controlling masculine pride.[18] Through interviews of different Latin American women, it was found that Peru had the most cases of physical violence within the domestic sphere, with over half of women again had been exposed to other forms of abuse and violence and fifty percent critically injured.[19] Additionally, almost one-fifth of women had also experienced sexual assault from a young age by a family member. In Lima, more than three-quarters of women interviewed had experienced psychological violence and trauma.[20]

Through the 1970s and 1980s women of Chile, Peru, Argentina, Uruguay, and Brazil became involved in a struggle for human rights and feminism.[21] In Chile, mothers became the forefront of resistance and resilience to factors of the private, public, and political spheres. With the patriarchy and machismo being so prevalent within these countries, women were rarely able to argue against their husbands or other men of the area. However, through a gained sense of community and organized groups with female leaders, in education, health, and labor, women began to learn how to combat these oppressions.[22]

In Argentina, a group referred to as The Madres would use their experiences of motherhood to expose the abuse of the government during the ten years of the Dirty War. This group first came together in 1977, in Buenos Aires. They publicly demanded the return of their children through weekly silent marches.[23] Women being involved in these public actions and having demands was very unexpected and considered a changing point in the attitudes of gendered roles. The Madres would expose the social confinement created upon being a woman, while simultaneously

[17] Dinur, "Chilean Women," 13.
[18] Tamar Diana Wilson, "Introduction: Violence against Women in Latin America," *Latin American Perspectives* 41, no. 1 (2014): 6.
[19] Ibid, 5.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Dinur, "Chilean Women," 13.
[23] Safa, "Women's Social Movements," 362.

expanding the depictions of women.[24] These Argentine mothers wanted to represent women as being resistant to the domestic sphere. They were no longer going to be complacent to political abuse. They drew attention to their families and individuals who had disappeared. One of their goals was to gain a sense of justice for these individuals who had been lost. Many of these lost individuals were their children, for which they demanded their return.[25] The Madres were able to develop connections through identifying with one another and sharing their stories. Together, women gained a substantial amount of momentum and spread their ideas through other Latin American countries, for decades to come.[26]

The importance of motherhood would also be represented in the accounts taken from the second generation of Brazil's victims to the government and those that had come back from exile. The political exiles were able to return in 1979, as the amnesty law was put into place.[27] As they returned, many people began to recount their experiences and abuses that they had been through due to this state sanctioned displacement. These accounts of the second generation showed how these individuals, as children, shared the experience of being innocent to why these political abuses were happening, in addition to their unawareness of the alleged crimes that their parents had been involved in.[28] Children were placed into many different difficult situations when their parents were being punished. Some of these situations included being sent away, either to an institution, to a different country, into torture facilities, etc. These accounts of what this generation and how they connected with each other is similar to how the Madres in Argentina were able to form a network. There is an emphasis on shared stories and connecting to gain a sense of identity, when they have been through incredibly intense, confusing, and traumatic events.

Relatively recently, in 2010, an article was released about an individual, Aleida, who was two years old when her parents were taken away by the government. Thirty-five years later, Aleida fought for her parents' case and their disappearance. She petitioned and worked towards spreading awareness of these human rights issues.

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[24] Fernando Bosco, "The Madres De Plaza De Mayo and Three Decades of Human Rights' Activism: Embeddedness, Emotions, and Social Movement." *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 96:2 (June 2006): 343.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Ibid., 540.
[28] Ibid., 542.

Within her process, she encountered other individuals who shared a connection with her:

> Sabrina and Sebastian, children of two of the victims of the Rosario torture center, Raquel Negro and Tulio Valenzuela. Sebastian was one-years old when his parents were disappeared by the military, and grew up with his grandparents. Raquel Negro was pregnant with Sabrina and her twin brother when she was kidnapped, and Sebastian grew up knowing that his mother gave birth to twins before she was disappeared and has spent years looking for his siblings. Sabrina was adopted in 1978 and did not know her true identity until 2008, when blood tests revealed her relation to Sebastian.[29]

These stories of the second generation provide an important perspective on these children who had lost their mothers and parents. They became the voices for their families who had disappeared, just as The Madres had done for their lost children. Stories like these are not uncommon. These connections and commonality of identities, however, have helped to spur social change. People with similar experiences to Aleida have worked endlessly to try to achieve some sort of justice for their family, along with other families that have suffered from these abuses from the government.

The Latin American movement towards feminism was not necessarily a search for an equal opportunity to be active within the aspects of the public and political sphere, at least as feminism is often displayed in Western terms. Rather, women explored their identities and all that it meant to be a mother to "legitimize their sense of injustice and outrage."[30] Being a mother in nineteenth century Latin America came with the expectation that they were meant to be the family caretaker. However, with political instability, these roles of motherhood often became unattainable, and these identities were stripped away from women. As mothers came

[29] Jesse Franzblau, "Truth, Reconciliation and Government Archives: What Justice in Argentina looks like from the Mexican Perspective," *Unredacted* (April 26, 2010). Accessed April 10, 2022. https://unredacted.com/2010/04/26/truth-reconciliation-and-government-archives-what-justice-in-argentina-looks-like-from-the-mexican-perspective/
[30] Ibid.