

Women and Revolutionary Movements Argentina 1960s—1970s

Women's struggles have been a major factor in Latin American history. However, after WWII through the first half of the 1970s, their struggles became more evident and radical. During a period of armed conflict in Latin America, women became entrenched in revolutionary movements with the exception of Argentine's women. Unlike other Latin American countries, Nicaragua and Mexico to name a few, where women's movements mingled with revolutionary movements, women's movement in Argentina was rather subsumed by Peronism in the country. Though the causes Latin American women were fighting for were very much similar, the path to achievement was somewhat different.

Truly, Argentine women as well as the rest of Latin America were fighting against the same issues: inequality, repression, and discrimination. As Sandor Halebsky and Richard L. Harris say in the Capital, Power, and Inequality in Latin America,

One of the most striking phenomena...is the extent to which the central concerns of contemporary life—access to housing, employment, health care, freedom from violence, full citizenship for all people, preservation of the environment—are being affectively articulated by women. Historically, women activists in Latin America, while insisting on the validity and specificity of the female experience, have posited their work as part of the search for social, economic, and political justice for all people..."(185)

Here, we see the basis of Latin American women's struggle, where women were seen as second class citizens. In many instances they were restricted from participating in certain public activities, such as political parties. "It was difficult for [women], especially working class to develop a working-class consciousness. [Women] were dependent on their husband's wage...their labor was being exploited."¹ In fact, women did not have autonomy. They could not go out alone, [or] returned late. They did not have sexual freedom such as using contraceptives and controlling the number of children they bore."² They were dominated by the male dominated class. As women's movement began to take root, women began to bring forth these ideas to the attention of the international world and thus began to shape political decisions in the region. When authors like Halebsky and Richard say that "historically, women activists in Latin America, while insisting on the validity and specificity of the female experience, have posited their work as part of the search for social, economic, and political justice for all people..." this implies that North American or European feminism are not as broad in scope as Latin American women. Latin American women took their struggle to a larger extent.

In addition, during the first half of the 20th century, as the economic condition of Latin America began to move from agriculture to light manufacturing, women's struggle adapted traditional working class demands such as better working condition, shorter work day, better pay, and paid benefit. For instance, according to Daniel James in the Resistance and Integration,

While the industrial economy expanded rapidly the working class did not benefit from this expansion. Real wages declined in general as salaries

¹ Nancy Caro Hollander "Women Workers and the Class Struggle The case of Argentina"

² Maria del Carmen Feijoo and Marcela M.A. Nari "Women in Argentina During the 1960s"

lagged behind inflation. Faced with concerted employer and state repression, workers could do little to successfully improve wages and work conditions. Labour and social legislation remained sparse and sporadically enforced. Outside the work place the situation was little better as working-class families confronted, unaided by the state, the social problems of rapid urbanization. (James p 8)

Here, we see not only the impact of the industrial economy on the working class, but also exploitation of workers. “Social legislation remained sparse and sporadically enforced.” Government remained powerless as all sorts of exploitation taking place. As James says, “unaided by the state,” meaning there was neither government actions nor regulation on behalf of workers. James goes on to call the [pre-1945] “a period of profound collective and individual frustration and humiliation [for worker] (p25).” As one Argentine, Don Ramiro, says in an interview: ...life was very hard...working people weren't worth anything and we got no respect from those who controlled everything” (James p.29). One can say that these factors and frustration towards governments' policies, the ruling class, social inequality, combined with double shifts and unpaid labor in the home, were what led Latin American women on a struggle to stand up for their rights on the workforce as the region started to shift from agricultural to light industry.

However, if women were fighting for the same struggle, why did they take different route? Surely women were fighting for “access to housing, employment, health care, freedom from violence, [and] full citizenship...”, but why did women choose to engage differently in the fight. On one hand, the majority of women chose to go along with Peronism, where “women's representation into the work force had increased. They

had become more involved in political activity” (Hollander, p. 183,184). In fact Maria del Carmen Feijoo and Marcela M. A. Nari, in their journal—“*Women in Argentina during the 1960s*”—say that “...Peronism had allowed women to become visible as political actors with full rights” (p.9). Other women, on the other hand, did not go along with Peronism. Many thought that Peronism would intentionally force them to abandon their feminist movement. They thought that Peronism muted the women’s movement because it mostly advocated rights for the working class but not specifically women’s. Apparently we can understand the difference that existed between the initial women’s movement and Peronism. The initial women’s movement was concerned over the capability of Peronists to rally women’s support. As Nancy Caro Hollander says in “Si Evita Viviera,” “coming on the heels of long years of struggle by other feminists and feminist organizations, Peronism distinguished itself from them by its ability to appeal to the masses of Argentine women.” Thus, we say that: though the claim of women outside Peronism—that Peronism muted the women’s movement by advocating rights for working class women—might be true, the concern was also over the fact that peronism was able to gain more support. As a result, many women made political choices on their class identity or saw in Peronism opportunities for women. “As Alicia Moreau...reported during an election...in the working class districts which she investigated, a very large percentage of women voted in favor of Peronism, while in the upper middle class districts, the majority of both men and women voted for the liberal Radical ticket...”³

Argentine women also achieved their rights differently with women in other parts of Latin America. Unlike other countries in Latin America, Argentina did not have a

³ Nancy Caro Hollander “Si Evita Viviera”

large women's revolutionary movement; nor did its women's movement mingle with other revolutionary movements or guerrilla movement like in Nicaragua and Mexico. Perhaps the opportunity that revolution presented in Nicaragua and Mexico to challenge social tradition was not the same. Thus, the women movement in Argentina became one with the Argentine's working class and thus was muted by calls from Peronism to unite the working class. Women joined forces together with working class against the oligarchy. In many instances, women's goals in Argentina became one with the working class. As Nancy Caro Hollander says,

“In social production, women are surrounded by other members of the working class who share a similar work experience. In this collective context it is possible for women workers to see themselves as part of a group of people with the same class interests and the same potential for class-conscious political struggle. Women...also develop bonds of solidarity with other women workers who...suffer from the additional burdens of housework and the psychological oppression of a male dominated culture.(p.181)

Here we see that women did not really perceive their struggle as a struggle of women, but of the working class in general. They joined force together, which we can say brought them closer to men who have also been a part of the working class. Together, they cooperated in favor of the working class. Because of their cooperation, women were less likely to blame men for their oppression. As Holland says, “The rhetoric of the [women] movement which emphasized the need of women to become independent of the political and economic influence of men did not in any way imply that men were the source of women's oppression.” However, that does not mean that the notion wasn't there. Some

male were still exercised negative attitudes towards women as they joined together and composed the Argentine's working class. Actually, it was not just men. Many women believed men to be superior. The domestic ideal of woman as wife and mother was there. In fact, Hollander continues to say, "Argentine culture continued to define women mainly in terms of their role within the family." This perception continued to pose problems for women specific demands that encouraged women to leave the home and do jobs other than housewives. According to Hollander,

the bourgeoisie...used working women as the scapegoat for imagined and real problems in Argentine society. Many prominent intellectuals and political economists blamed...women working outside the home for a series of crises such as a declining birth rate, the declining moral significance of the family, the increasing unemployment rate among men due to "unfair" competition of cheap female labor, and the consequent decline in the dominant position of the father within the family structure. (Hollander p.185)

Presented here are challenges that women faced in the Argentine society as they made their demands clear. Working class women were suffered under middle class women. "the bourgeoisie, [which also included women], used working women as the scapegoat for imagined and real problems in Argentine society." But in general, one thing that those "prominent intellectuals and political economist" did not see is the fact that a full employed work-force was in the advantage of Argentina, and thus an increase in the country's output and GDP. Instead, they blamed women for virtually all kind of social problems. That was really a major problem for women in Argentina as they decided to expand their roles. Women were also criticized by "prestigious publications, such as

the *Revista de Economía Argentina* and the *Catholic Criterio*, plus popular journals, books, and newspapers, printed analyses which suggested that married women should be encouraged or forced out of the paid work force because paid work brought about a tendency to search for diversions that distracted them from their responsibilities.” In general there was a widespread fear of women in the Argentine’s workforce.

Having said that, if women faced such a terrible challenge, why hadn’t they been more radical? Why hadn’t they taken up arms in large numbers, like elsewhere in the region, to counteract those who objected to their demands? Apparently, there were reasons for that. There were possible factors that might cause the low level of participation of women in guerrilla movement in Argentina. First of all, immigration was an issue. Since most women in Argentina were foreign born, it was very difficult for them. They were afraid of the repercussions—the notion that if being caught, they would be deported. Secondly, women witnessed the split of Peronism, which evidently rendered working class women within the movement less powerful and coherent. Or simply said, there was just a weakness of guerrilla movement because Peronism isolated the radical. Or, perhaps Monteneros did not place importance on women’s issues.

Another factor that might cause the low level of women participation in guerrilla movement was because women had been more identified as part of the labor struggle, which was indeed the focal point of Peronism—not guerrilla activities. According to Hollander, “Peron defined his movement’s goal to be the elimination of the struggle between the classes and the substitution of it with the cooperation of labor and capital...” Here, we want to say that, unlike Nicaragua and Mexico, Peron did not say he would carry out these goals by guerrilla mean. He did not advocate such approach to carry out

his policies in case of resistance. According to "Encyclopædia Britannica Article" "Montoneros—a guerrilla group—remained active during [Peron's] 18-year absence. When Perón returned to Argentina...he condemned the Montoneros..." Indeed, after Peron died, his wife Isabel Peron referred to him as "a true apostle of peace and nonviolence."⁴ Thus, we can say these were probably reasons women were not so much active in guerrilla activities despite hardship they encountered.

In addition to the fact that Peron did not encourage guerrilla movement, Halebsky and Harris, in the Capital Power, and Inequality in Latin America made it clear that "...women had waged a half century-long campaign for the vote, suffrage laws [that] had been passed in other Western Hemisphere nations, and commitment to equal political rights [that] was part of the U.N Charter, to which Argentina was a signatory. What Eva Peron did was deliver the new female vote for the Peronist Party" (p.196). Here we can say women tried to carry out their goals not by guerrilla activity, nor by taking up arms but by voting. Also, we should say that Eva Peron took control of women movement and gave credit exclusively to Peron.

Despite the existing anti-feminist feeling, Peron, as the head of the Peronist movement, "distinguished himself from the anti-feminist sentiments..." As Hollander goes further to say,

[Being] cognizant of the discriminatory working condition and wage differentials women suffered..., he established Argentina's first special women's Division of Labor and Assistance, asserting that women workers should be covered by protective legislation and had the right to equal pay for equal work....[Peron later] urged that legislation be passed giving women the

⁴ Jonathan Kandell, New York Times Historical, Jul 2, 1974

right to vote on the basis of their historical contributions to the development of the Argentine nation...Women won improvements in their work conditions and wages. The official work day was fixed at eight hours...(p.187)

What we see here is the unprecedented achievements of the women's revolutionary within Peronism. The goals of women during their struggle were carried out by men, such as Juan Peron, with the strong influence of his wife, Eva. He guaranteed women necessary rights. Having a man carry out the goals of women apparently appear to limit the image of women as leaders. But this should not be surprising as women did not have power in political sphere. Moreover, unlike other places in Latin America, Argentina's women's revolutionary goals did not carry out with so much bloodshed; the response rather was bloody. It was not until after Peron went to exile that women, as part of the working class, began to be repressed; and it wasn't until the military regime overthrew the last Peronist government... that women were indiscriminately assassinated during the so called "Dirty War." As Hollander says "Knowing that women were an integral part of Peronism, the military government does not hesitate to brutalize and assassinate women as well as men who appear to be a danger to the existing system" (Hollander p.192).

However, in other parts of Latin America, especially Nicaragua and Mexico, women's struggle to achieve certain rights was more radical. They took up arms and made physical sacrifices. According to Margaret Randall,

[in Nicaragua]...Women made up 30 per cent of the Sandinist army and held important leadership positions, commanding everything from small units to full battalions...they fought heroically in spite of severe repression...by 1972, more and more women were getting involved (p. xii).

Here we see the extensive participation of women in Nicaragua. They had no male figure like Peron to stand up for them. They did not mingle with any large working class movement for help. They took the bold step and stood up for themselves. But we should also say that women in Nicaragua were very much a part of the FSLN which was more radical than Peronism. Furthermore, for us to understand the level of women participation in Nicaragua, in contrast to Argentina, we must take a look at women's living conditions in Nicaragua. As Margaret says

...it is impossible to understand the tremendous participation of women in the war of liberation [in Nicaragua] without knowing something about the conditions that the majority of Nicaraguans faced...the most visible and brutal characteristic of life in Nicaragua was the contrast between the extreme poverty of the majority and tremendous wealth of the very few...(p.xii)

The level of women participation in Nicaragua also can be attributed to poverty and repressions, even though this is not always the case that most impoverished countries have the most radical revolution. In Argentina, poverty was not a major factor. Rather, it was a struggle for better working conditions, better pay, shorter work days, and equality within the work-force. For instance, as one worker said during an interview, "you felt you didn't have rights to anything, everything seemed to be a favor they did for you. The police there treated you like animals too" (James p.29). There is a call here for unionization. Because women struggle formed one with that of the working class in Argentina, women were very much involved in the struggle for unionization.

A lack of deep poverty was not the only factor in Argentina that made women less radical in contrast to Nicaragua. The perception of some women towards Peronism also played a role. Though Peronism provided women with full rights, not all women joined force to mount a radical movement. As mentioned before, Argentina's society prevented women's movement from being more radical. It was composed mostly of immigrants coming from Europe. They were not assimilated enough to the point of taking up arms, and many were afraid of being deported.

Despite their low profile, it is true that women were an integral part of the resistance movement in the 1960s and 1970s in Argentina, during the Arturo Illia's government and the military regime. However, we have limited evidence to support Hollander's claim that "women were involved in armed guerrilla groups that emerged in the late 1960s and 70s." (Hollander p. 191-192). There is limited evidence to support that claim. So to what extent women participated in guerrilla activities with the Montoneros? Why is it appeared there isn't much information in English about women involvement in guerrilla movement in Argentina? Why are there limited resources about that?

Hollander is not the only one that says that women were involved in resistance movement and fails to let us know to what extent. Many social scientists imply or briefly mention women's involvement but, it is not a primary research topic. An example is Maria del Carmen Feijoo and Marcela M. A. Nari who give us some insight about women involvement in guerrilla movement but not in detail.

After the fall of Peron, many women went to jail as a consequence of their political participation. Other returned to their homes and still others remained active in the Peronist resistance....Many female militants emerged from the banned Feminine Branch and from the unions. They generally performed anonymous tasks, such as work in the

communications networks and providing hiding places for the persecuted....Only a few women became leaders... (Hollander p.9)

Again, we see women's involvement in guerrilla activities. Political persecution had caused them to join guerrilla movement, where they "performed anonymous tasks, such as work in the communications networks and providing hiding places for the persecuted..." (Hollander p.9). But the extent to which they participated still remained unclear. What level of women were involved in this kind of job? How come many of the jobs women performed while they were in these resistance movements are still being mentioned as "anonymous"? Why aren't there any interviews conducted to know what exactly women's jobs were in these resistant movements? Perhaps the literature in Spanish explores this aspect of Argentine history. May be there are enough evidence in the Spanish language; but in English, resources have been limited. Thus, this can be a research project about Argentina's women.

In Nicaragua and other parts in the region, there is enough information about women involvement in guerrilla activities. From testimonies with women who were involved, we know exactly what their tasks were. For example, Ana Julia plainly describes her tasks in a guerrilla movement in Nicaragua.

[I] worked in the neighborhoods and had jobs such as buying clothing, food and other supplies for the guerrillas. I also acted as a messenger. I took part in an assault on a bank and had to go underground. When I went underground I was sent to a training school in the mountains....We studied political, military and cultural questions. We learned some basic nursing techniques. But the emphasis was on military training. It's because of those classes that I'm the guerrilla I am today. Eight or nine of us decided to form a group in the mountains. The others all went to work in mass organizing...(Randall p.131).

In contrast to the “anonymous tasks” of Argentine women in guerrilla movements, here we have a clear understand of women’s involvement in guerrilla movements in Nicaragua. We possess a good understanding of what women’s roles and tasks were. As Randall says, after joining, women were “trained...[in] nursing and military techniques [while others] went to work in mass organizing.”

Another example that reveals enough details about women involvement in guerrilla movement in other parts of Latin America is found in The Women’s Revolution in Mexico, 1910-1953 by Stephanie Mitchell and Patience A. Schell.

Maria Tereza Rodriguez—a woman in the Zapatistas guerrilla movement in Chiapas Mexico—undertook various commissions for the Central Revolutionary Committee of Mexico City. She carried letters, arms, and bombs to the different zones in which the rebel groups in contact with the committee operated. She became a confidential agent for General Heriberto Jara. She recruited sympathizers...and 250 volunteers (p.22, 23).

Again, here, unlike Argentina, we have enough detail about women’s participation in guerrilla activity in Mexico. Women performed different tasks. They “carried out letters, arms, and bombs to the different zones in which the rebel groups...operated.” I should also mention this example is only one of so many about women’s role. Indeed, the whole text, just like the one about Nicaragua, is about women participation in guerrilla activity in Mexico. So, why isn’t there any text dedicated solely to women participation in guerrilla activity in Argentina, like we see in Nicaragua and Mexico?

In conclusion, one thing that can be said despite the different approaches Argentine women took compared to their counterparts in Latin America is that they have similar goals. Their movements demand more independence. They seek to expanding opportunities outside the home. Women’s movements in Argentina become more

coordinated nationally as they're enjoying the many rights Peronism granted them. They've become more politically active. In 1974, after the death of Peron, Isabel Peron took over and became the next president. She was the first woman chief of states in the Americas. She later asserted that her new role during a speech when she said "I am the abstract hand of Peron who continues to guide us all."⁵ We can say that Argentine's women were increasingly becoming assertive of their role.

Likewise, in Nicaragua and Mexico, women become more independent. They're no longer confined in the home, and they also become more politically active. They have become directors of national political parties, presidential guards, ministers, union leaders and occupied many other high level posts. For instance, in Nicaragua, women such as Violeta Barrios de Chamorro, was a presidential candidate. In general, one can say women in Latin America have gained more access to liberty and freedom as a result of their struggles.

Despite these achievements, women in Argentina and elsewhere in the region continue to face all kind of discriminations as if they'd never contributed anything to their society. Though there is big improvement on the status of women in Argentina and Latin America as a whole, quite a lot of work remains to be done for women to achieve full equality with men. To name a few, women are still under-represented in public offices and private institutions. But there are ways to achieve equality. One way Argentine's women can eventually achieve equality in the face of discrimination is to join force together with other women's movements in the region and around the world and form a solid bond against discrimination and repressions. This is definitely a way of exposing to shame those who purposely discriminate against them.

⁵ Jonathan Kandell, New York Times historical, Sept 2, 1974.

Another way through which Argentine Women can seek to achieve full equality is to continue emphasizing women's contribution in society: how they've contributed economically, politically, and socially. What Argentina's or Latin America's society would have looked like without women contributions? In what way did women contribute in revolutionary movements against repressive governments? What would Argentina's or Latin American countries' economy look like today without the participation of women? As JoAnn Fagot Aviel says "Latin American women have contributed in many independent variables, education, and economic."⁶ More research is needed to assess the level of women participation, especially in guerrilla activities, and the way in which women have positively transformed Argentina's society.

Mentioning above are just possible ways women can achieve full equality. It does not mean that discrimination against women would totally eradicate. We understand the level of complexity that exists in perceptions towards women. But we might hope anti women perception would be reduced. What we must keep in mind is the more we expose all different kinds of discriminations and repressions in our society, the more people will stand up against them.

⁶ JoAnn Fagot Aviel "**Political Participation of Women in Latin America**" p.1

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