

## **Mothering Mother Earth; The Power of Women in Modern Third World Reform Movements**

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### **Abstract**

Long before recorded history, procreation and childbirth introduced a clear differentiation in the natural human power structure; and before Cromagnon man and woman became too involved in the importance of ego or prescribed roles, the female body emerged as a vital and delectable object of worship. Not only was woman endowed with the power to bring human life into this world, but her monthly cycle proved also that she could regularly lose her lifeblood without dying. “This surely made them mysterious. Women could also induce an involuntary sexual response in men. This made them dangerous.”<sup>1</sup> Clearly, woman’s sacred, supreme ability both to give birth to and nurture her own offspring placed her in a unique position of power. In far-reaching locations, mammoth stone-cut and hand-molded images of the female form were hewn by prehistoric, goddess-worshipping civilizations. Through the centuries, societies became more sedentary, more populous, and competed for hegemony. As warfare increased, Greek and Roman civilizations focused on the power of the male physique, and female leadership waned. However, the feminine ability to nurture and preserve has never declined.

The path of the nurturing female continues to leave an indelible mark upon today’s world. Whether working to cast off imperialism, promote revolutionary reform, protect their environment and the lives of their offspring, women have continually called upon their unique instincts and passions to protect their children, society and environment. Reform-minded women have historically subjected themselves to ridicule, rebuttal, abuse, even death, while stubbornly pursuing social and political change.

The purpose of this report is to compare and parallel the ongoing successes of women in modern third-world reform movements, in the hope of identifying workable models and methods, especially in light of the recent Arab Spring. This study focuses on four third world revolutionary movements: the Himalayan Chipko movement (India), post-colonial tribal women of Kenya (Africa), the revolutionary Zapatista women of Chiapas (Mexico), and Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo (Argentina). Special emphasis will be placed on the success stories in India and Argentina. It is clear that female revolutionaries have one characteristic in common. As stated by Amina al-Said of Egypt, “The role of women does not end with peace” (the title of an article she wrote, as Egyptian women volunteered for the Army, in 1956). In fact, it is in the immediate post-colonial, post-revolutionary, post-junta world that the greatest chaos occurs. The most eminent evil overthrown, a return to the old, traditional patriarchy is often violently intensified

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara S. Lesko. *The Great Goddesses of Egypt*. Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, ©1999, 4.

by colonial or revolutionary patriarchy. This is especially true among the most marginalized sectors of society—the indigenous women of the Third World. One clear fact emerges from this study—the exponential effects of capitalist globalization have worked to greatly usurp women’s rights in the Third World; and this process was well underway by the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

### **The Chipko Movement of Himalayan India**

The tentacles of British imperialism in India reach centuries into the past, taking root as early as 1600, when England established its East India Company. According to British Professor Peter Marshall, “India offered foreign traders the skills of its artisans in weaving cloth and winding raw silk, agricultural products for export, such as sugar, the indigo dye or opium, and the services of substantial merchants and rich bankers.”<sup>2</sup> The East India Company steadily increased its presence and trading power throughout the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Historically, their timing for expansion in the region was perfect.

By 1815, the Garhwal region was completely under British East India Company control. “The prospect of gaining entry into the famous trading cities of Bokhara, Yarkand, Samarkand, and Lhasa along the old Silk Route was immensely alluring.”<sup>3</sup> Additionally, the East India Company had already begun to dominate the opium trade; in Garhwal they found an abundance of the crop needed for opium production. “It expanded opium production in India and skillfully blended the rhetoric of free trade with imperial force to persuade the Chinese government to remove barriers against the sale of opium and other commodities by British merchants at Chinese ports.” Having laid the groundwork for Chinese opium addiction, and the fortune that could garner, the British next fixed their sites upon providing for their own addiction—speculating in “tea cultivation in India.”<sup>4</sup>

The East India Company’s success in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century was so visible and desirable to its employees that they began to invest privately in farming ventures, as “employee-entrepreneurs,”<sup>5</sup> and soon tea farms and plantations dotted the landscape formerly occupied by trees. This is when the English Parliament decided to intervene—not to reduce British power, but to diminish the power of the East India Company. Unfortunately, the indigenous peoples of both Garhwal and its neighbor, Kumaon, were pawns in this power struggle. However, the biggest losers were the landless peasants, who scavenged for survival.

Throughout Indian history, the idea of public land use has been the mainstay for the Indian peasantry, especially forest peasants. Under the veil of India’s Himalayan subtropical trees lay an entire ecosystem upon which one could survive and make a living scavenging for products to sell. Native to that region are not only the opium poppies and bamboo, but a great

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<sup>2</sup> Peter Marshall, “The British Presence in India in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century,” BBC Online, [http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/empire\\_seapower/east\\_india\\_01.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/empire_seapower/east_india_01.shtml), 1-2

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 91.

variety of shrubs, trees and "...33 herb species."<sup>6</sup> In fact, as Kumar, Sheikh and Bussmann have reported in the *Journal of Ethnobiology and Ethnomedicine*, v. 7:

*The old Indian Systems of Medicine (ISM) are among the most ancient medical traditions known, and derive maximum formulations from plants and plant extracts found in the forests. About 400 plants are used in the regular production of Ayurvedic, Unani, Siddha, and tribal medicine. About 75% of these are taken from tropical forests and 25% from temperate forests. Thirty (30) percent of ISM preparations are derived from roots, 14% from bark, 16% from whole plants, 5% from flowers, 10% from fruits, 6% from leaves, 7% from seeds, 3% from wood, 4% from rhizomes, and 6% from stems. Fewer than 20% of the plants used are cultivated.*<sup>7</sup>

This list of native Himalayan bounty clarifies the fact that the British had much to gain as they dominated the region, exploited the ecosystem, and grew wealthy along the way. To assure the continuing welfare of the rich forestlands, the British crown took managerial control away from the East India Company in 1858, and soon established the "Imperial Forest Service."<sup>8</sup> Forestry became a dominant occupation, in an effort to maintain the riches nature had endowed upon the region. Unfortunately, British forestry practices focused more on extraction than preservation.

From 1858, and through the following century, India's Himalayan agricultural residents—British and Indian alike—experienced great loss through British crown policy. The "employee-entrepreneurs" lost farms, sharecroppers lost ground, peasants lost their land use rights through imperial policy; and as the oxy-moron of "forestry preservation" prevailed, the region became a major source of timber for the British Navy. Already marginalized by the mercantilist activity of the East India Company, the local economy suffered further as the irony of British "protectionism" and extraction policy raped the native forest environment, and stripped away the rights of local peasant populations. Native trees were replaced by non-native, and the subsystems which fed off the native branch also wilted. As Indians were forced into a position described as "deeply ingrained backwardness," the British further insulted the Himalayan Indians by stating they could improve their situation through "benevolent foreign rule."<sup>9</sup> Vandana Shiva described the situation well when she stated, "As usual, in every scheme that worsens the position of the poor, it is the poor who are invoked as beneficiaries."<sup>10</sup> It took a century of distress before those "beneficiaries" were free to voice their collective discontent.

The British gave up their imperial "jewel in the crown," as Winston Churchill called India, in 1947, amidst a period of strife within India and world chaos following World War II.

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<sup>6</sup> Munesh Kumar, Mehraj A. Sheikh, & Rainer W. Bussmann, "Ethnomedicinal and ecological status of Plants in Garhwal, Himalaya, India," *Journal of Ethnobiology and Ethnomedicine*, v. 7, October 19, 2011.

<sup>7</sup> "Amruth." *FRLHT, Bangalore*, 10. August 1997.

<sup>8</sup> Rangan, 96.

<sup>9</sup> Marshall, 3.

<sup>10</sup> Robert J.C. Young, *Postcolonialism; A Very Short Introduction*, 101.

Not until the 1970s did India's political climate call for a stronger sense of nationalism, and this encouraged "state intervention in all economic sectors."<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, "...the national government, under Mrs. Gandhi's leadership, had intervened in both the sphere of circulation, that is to say, banking, credit, insurance, transport, distribution, and foreign trade, and the sphere of industrial production"<sup>12</sup> by the mid-1970s. A spirit of reform was already underway when the citizens of Garhwal began their protest against deforestation.

Aware of the detrimental effects of deforestation upon their rich ecosystem, residents of Garhwal united in protest in 1973. "During the felling seasons between 1973 and 1975, village leaders urged their communities to prevent timber merchants and contractors from extracting trees in adjoining Reserve forests."<sup>13</sup> At that time, both men and women participated in the practice which became known as "tree-hugging." During the years from 1973 to 1975, women came to dominate the movement, for very important reasons. "The women challenged the principles of the whole system, charging that the men had been ideologically colonized by the short-term commercial values of the market place, trying to take control of nature just as patriarchy tries to control women." As natural cultivators and traditional agrarians, the women preferred preservation of the original forest system over short-run depletion and scientific renewal. The women stated that their "...repositories of intimate knowledge both of husbandry and of the medicinal and nutritional value of a wide variety of plants" made them the natural protectors of their Himalayan forests. Their tactics were simple but dangerous. Joining hands and wrapping themselves around huge, ancient trees, these women challenged lumberjacks to mutilate their bodies, before they could fell their beloved trees. Photos of the "Chipko"<sup>14</sup> women were first shared in neighboring communities, neighboring states, across India, and eventually broadcast around the world. India could no longer ignore the problem.

By 1975, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was ready to take action, and Congress was already conducive to the climate of change. The congressional government in Uttar Pradesh "...responded to Mrs. Gandhi's exhortations by legislating the UP Forest Corporation Act 1975."<sup>15</sup> It was a start. However, the rising power of the global community has since complicated the efforts of the Chipko community, which in return has strengthened its efforts and resolve:

*The Chipko movement believes that forestation programmes run by central or state government bureaucrats based on the criteria of forest science destroy both the diversity of the forest ecoculture and the resource of commons and forest as a provider of food, fuel, building materials, medicines, and so on for local people.*

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<sup>11</sup> Rangan, 163.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 162.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 152.

<sup>14</sup> 'In Hindi, chipko means, "to embrace." This was taken from Rachel Brinker's article, "Dr. Vandana Shiva and Feminist Theory," *Conference on Earth Democracy: Women, Justice and Ecology*, October 23, 2009. "Vandana Shiva was one of the women involved in this movement, which resisted industrial forestry and logging in rural India."

<sup>15</sup> Rangan, 163.

*A typical example of how this works would be the disregard of local species of trees and the widespread planting of a single non-indigenous species, such as eucalyptus, which produces no humus and therefore fails to conserve water in the soil, destroying the food system supporting plant, animal, and human life.<sup>16</sup>*

Ecofeminists such as Vandana Shiva place a good deal of blame on the World Bank, which works closely with states and nations to impose its brand on local agriculture. Growth of non-native crops, the use of science to genetically alter crops, of chemicals to treat agriculture and trees, as well as redistribution of native lands, have all led to the demise of local ecosystems. Furthermore, the process of privatizing formerly public lands insures the downfall of the forest peasantry.

For these reasons and more, the work of the Chipko women continues today. Arundhati Roy has worked tirelessly on behalf of the poor rural women of India, especially in the region of the Narmada Valley:

*Here, a vast infrastructural project, costing billions of rupees, is displacing 200,000 Adivasi villagers and nomadic forest dwellers at enormous human and environmental cost. The disregard for the people affected is callous in the extreme. After a long campaign, the NBA<sup>17</sup> succeeded in getting the World Bank, which was funding the project, to withdraw on the grounds of its adverse human and environmental impact.<sup>18</sup>*

The female leaders of India's Chipko environmental movement had two goals from inception: to prevent future deforestation, and return the already altered topography to its original condition. 'The notion of "Cut me down before you cut down a tree,"<sup>19</sup> has halted lumberjacks across Garhwal and the Uttarkhand. In 1974, Mrs. Gaura Devi led female residents of Reni Village (in Uttarkhand) in blocking '...an army of lumberjacks, singing: "This forest is our mother's home; we will protect it with all our might."<sup>20</sup> Uninterrupted activity by the women already named, as well as Sundar Lal Bahuguna (Gandhian) and Chandi Prasad Bhatt (Marxist), has made the issue of saving India's forest part of the national dialogue. Early in the 1980s, Prime Minister Gandhi '...ordered a 15-year ban on cutting trees 1,000 meters above sea level in the Himalayan forests (she believed that Chipko represented India's "moral conscience").<sup>21</sup>

Success in halting deforestation has been very tangible. Unfortunately, attention to women's rights has been "cut out" of the conversation. Aparna Pallavi reports on India's Land Rights Act, which passed January 1, 2008: "India's land rights act enacted Jan. 1 was considered

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<sup>16</sup> Young, 105.

<sup>17</sup> Narmada Bachao Andolan, a populist campaign in the region.

<sup>18</sup> Young, 106.

<sup>19</sup> A. Singhal & S. Lubjuhn. Chipko Environmental Movement Media (India). In J.D.H. Downing (Ed.) Encyclopedia of Social Movement Media (pp. 91-92). Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publications, 91.

<sup>20</sup> Singhal & Lubjuhn, 91.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 92.

a major milestone for tribal and forest-dwelling communities. But women's activists say it fails to protect the property rights of women, some of whom are forming collectives to hold on to land."<sup>22</sup> Pushpa Toppo, from Jharkhand, has spent the past 45 years of her life in the Chipko environmental movement. She is pleased that the 2008 Land Rights Act would preserve forest life, especially the Bengal tiger. However, it does not stipulate any protection for the local tribal women, of such Indian states as Garhwal, Jharkhand, Orissa, Chattisgarh, and Uttar Pradesh. Regarding this omission of tribal rites protection, activist Pramila Swain states: "It is very likely that the land rights of widowed, deserted and unmarried women will get usurped by male family members at the time of rights settlement."<sup>23</sup> Ironically, this usurpation of women's rights proves negative for the entire tribe, as evidenced by the following information from the online journal, *Bio One*:

*Fodder collection is conducted in groups consisting of kin or school friends. The matriarch of the household determines whether oak foliage, grass, fuelwood, or leaf litter needs to be collected that day and who should collect it. The location for collecting fodder is determined by the climatic season, agricultural cropping cycle, the time of day, the settlement from which the fodder collection group departs from, and the age and gender composition of the group.*<sup>24</sup>

The foregoing study was conducted in Beli village, in the Tehri Garhwal District, Garhwal Division. It is just one of many proofs regarding the ancient wisdom which must be passed down by the elder females.

For these reasons, today's female tribal activists are forming collectives and seeking legal protection for collective control. The established pattern has prevented women from inheriting land. Under collective control, women will insure that all women will have land use rights—especially important to single, deserted and widowed women. Indigenous women, protecting indigenous women and the local environment—this is a model for the world and the World Bank to follow.

### **Tribal Women of Kenya, Africa**

From the middle of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, and over the next four centuries, Europeans crossed the Mediterranean, circumnavigated, and explored the African continent, to establish and dominate trade routes and resources on the "dark continent,"<sup>25</sup> as it came to be known. This race for treasures inevitably led to a meeting in the home of German Chancellor Otto Von Bismarck in November, 1884. To avoid another war, fourteen nations met to agree upon a peaceful

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<sup>22</sup> Aparna Pallavi, "India's Forest Law Leaves Women Feeling Cut Out," *WeNews*, April 20, 2008, 1.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>24</sup> Yuka Makino, "Lopping of Oaks in Central Himalaya, India," Source: Mountain Research and Development, 31(1):35-44. 2011. Published By: International Mountain Society/Republished in *Bio One* online. URL: <http://www.bioone.org/doi/full/10.1659/MRD-JOURNAL-D-10-00078.1>, 36.

<sup>25</sup> Alvin Edt Josephy, *The Horizon; History of Africa*, American Heritage Publishing Co., New York, 1971, 42.

settlement regarding the partitioning of Africa. The outcome of that conference placed the future of most African natives in the hands of seven European nations: Belgium, Great Britain, France, Italy, Portugal, Spain and Germany.

This peaceful decision certainly did not mean peace or prosperity for Africans. During its centuries of empire building, British reaction to indigenous social order followed a predictable line. First, most tribal lands were confiscated, and natives became tenants of the British crown. Women were subordinated and domesticated, men were trained in agriculture, and the end result was always economically positive for Mother England. Kenya was no exception to this rule. Prior to British control of Kenya, the nation was not unified, tribes were governed by chiefs and tribal councils, and these consisted primarily of male elders. Though most tribes practiced patriarchy, females were honored and socialized to become homemakers and agrarians. They therefore experienced empowerment as entrepreneurs, selling their handmade and grown products in public markets. Under British colonial control, this social arrangement was overruled. Land was redistributed; women lost their role as agrarians, were domesticated, and men were forced to cultivate cash crops. British control left this abiding imprint upon the male psyche within Kenya.

After decades of domination over Kenyan tribes, the British were eventually challenged by an uprising of nationalist factions. The Mau Mau rebellion was conducted by a conglomeration of dispossessed natives and gained further support from discontented trade unionists. Their war for liberation took place from 1952 to 1955, took the lives of many British settlers, but resulted in loss for the Mau Mau rebels as well. “Tens of thousands of workers and squatters were deported en masse from Nairobi and European farms to concentration camps and compulsory villages, where a horrific regime of torture and forced labor led to many deaths, maiming, and even castration and insanity.”<sup>26</sup> A new social order was imposed, as those natives loyal to the British were rewarded with a superior status among Kenyan tribes. When Kenya finally gained its independence in 1963, this social order remained, and those tribes who emerged as subordinate struggled for economic viability for years to come. Kenya’s focus for the 1960s, like most liberated African nations, was upon the ideal of “developmentalism, the pursuit of development at all costs.”<sup>27</sup>

In spite of flirting with the possibility of authoritarianism for a couple of decades, the Kenya of 1978 finally emerged with an economic model for “Kenyanization” based upon capitalism, according to P.T. Zeleza.<sup>28</sup> By the 1990s, Kenya was further transitioning toward becoming a democratic nation. Nevertheless, the movement toward democracy was more of a drift than a stride, and the legacy of British imperialism has left a firm imprint of patriarchy and

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<sup>26</sup> P.T. Zeleza, “The Developmental and Democratic Challenges of Postcolonial Kenya,” p. 4 of *The Zeleza Post; Informed News and Commentary on the Pan African World*. This was first delivered in a public lecture as the 2008 C.L.R. James Lecture, St. Lawrence University, Canton, New York, September 22, 2008.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 7-8.

hierarchy upon the social order. Those who have suffered most in this transition are the Kenyan indigenous females who reside in the lower economic sector.

A return to patriarchy for Kenyan women has brought a strict divide in the human rights structure. Among most kinship groups, females must attain permission from their fathers (or elder male) in order to attend school, and most males within this class consider schooling a waste of money. If anyone in the family is educated, it will be male offspring. Females should marry and bear children, and this does not require an education. Schools are private and very costly. Generally speaking, only daughters of the wealthy have access to education. For the remainder, far too many young teenaged women are forced into marriages with much older men, and the horrors of “Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) as a rite of passage in some communities...” continues to “...stigmatize and traumatize young girls for life.”<sup>29</sup>

After decades of capitalism and so-called democratization, tribal females still struggle for parity through a return to agricultural development and land rights, one area in which even uneducated females can prosper if allowed. Many choose entrepreneurialism, through their beautiful beadwork, jewelry and the manufacture of clothing. Nevertheless, significant barriers stand in their paths—political, cultural, and economic. As Claris Gatwiri Kariuki states,

*The high level of illiteracy makes it difficult for women to understand their voting options. In marginalized communities such as the Massai, the Samburu, and Turkana, young girls are not sent to school, as their fathers believe that it is a waste of time and money to educate a girl, as her only role will be that of a wife. The Massai men consider it a worthy investment to educate boys instead.....Family voting is a practice where women are led to the voting booth by their male relatives or husbands. This hugely constricts their freedom to vote for whomever they please.....In Kenya, women who run for political posts face society opposition, from both male and female citizens. Most opt to drop out of the political race.*<sup>30</sup>

In spite of these barriers, progress is visible, and this can be attributed only to the dogged perseverance of Kenyan women. “Under the new Kenyan constitution, the percentage of women in parliament is expected to increase to 29.4 percent come the 2012 general elections.”<sup>31</sup> Women have forced the government of Kenya to create “The Ministry of Gender, Children, and Social Development” for the express purpose of enhancing female economic empowerment,<sup>32</sup> and the “Caucus for Women’s Leadership” has provided a “national network dedicated to building women’s leadership in Kenya.”<sup>33</sup> Considering the struggles of the past two centuries, these are huge steps forward for Kenyan females. Unfortunately, increased power within the Kenyan

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<sup>29</sup> Claris Gatwiri Kariuki, “Women Participation in the Kenyan Society,” 4, published in *The African executive*.

<sup>30</sup> Kariuki, 4.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, footnote #4, 4.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

political framework is just one step toward female independence. Internal economic affairs within Third World nations are always complicated by the rights of capitalists on a global scale, thanks to the IMF and World Food Bank:

*Moreover, the presence of multinational corporations as a consequence of globalization has further impacted on land use.....Tobacco under American and British Tobacco (BAT) contract farming, and cotton under Cotton Marketing Board, a parasitic state body, replaced food production and shifted labour to cash crops. Cutting trees for tobacco curing led to soil erosion that washed away minerals such as iron and iodine which are vital to women's health.....Tobacco farming also led to a decrease in firewood, an important source of fuel.<sup>34</sup>*

Historically, developing remedies for poverty and starvation on the world stage (via the World Food Bank) has resulted in the destruction of local environments, ecosystems and food supplies. “With the globalization of the market and culture, for many people in the Third World countries, conditions have not improved, but indeed gotten worse. The litany of gains from trade for all countries that participate in international trade does not work for most of Third World countries that depend on agricultural production...and depend on importation of capital goods from the West.”<sup>35</sup>

As the title of this paper suggests, the job of saving Mother Earth tends to be guided by the feminine hand. As women have risen to power in Kenya, those who have had the benefit of a higher education, such as Claris Gatwiri Kariuki, are busy advocating for all women, in the areas of education, land rights, an end to female genital mutilation and choice in marriage. Unfortunately, they face a number of adversaries—traditional males within their own society, and the multinational corporations who employ young, uneducated females in Third World sweatshops and factories. While these corporations could provide funding to improve the female position within Kenya, education and empowerment of these women would result in the loss of the virtually enslaved corporate workforce.

### **Zapatistas of Chiapas, Mexico**

The country of Mexico has a history replete with revolutionary activity. From the ancient period to the present, history has recorded struggles between the Mayans and Aztecs, later defeated by the Spanish conquistadores in 1521. Though dominated by Spain, a couple of centuries of peace and prosperity ensued, while indigenous people died by the millions due to Old World bacteria, viruses and technology. Spain was finally defeated and ousted in 1821, and Mexico's real economic struggles ensued. The Mexican War against the United States was concluded with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848), which settled half of Mexico's territory upon the United

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<sup>34</sup> E. Wangari, W. Kamau, A.M. Kinyau, “GLOBALIZATION IN THE THIRD WORLD: IMPACT ON WOMEN'S LAND RIGHTS AND EDUCATION IN KENYA,” 297, in the *Forum on Public Policy*.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 291.

States. Over the next century, efforts to create a more democratic form of government led to the downfall of several presidents, and the eventual Mexican Revolution (1910-1920). These wars for hegemony, of course, have no connection—and bear little resemblance—to the blood wars by drug lords across Mexico today; but this latter problem greatly complicates the efforts of the modern day Zapatista Movement.

Most people today think of Mexico as a country of “Mexicans.” Few are aware of the great diversity of tribes, kinship groups, languages and cultures which exist beneath the umbrella of Mexican citizenship. Surprisingly, many indigenes in remote pockets of Mexico have maintained their ethnic purity, identities, cultures, and languages. Most have clung fiercely to their roots, in spite of the fact that this has kept them impoverished, with little opportunity for upward mobility.

The peoples of Chiapas, Mexico provide a perfect example of this type of local culture. Though representing a plethora of indigenous tribes, they are nevertheless clumped together under the ethnic identity of the Mayan civilization. However, a Mayan living in Cancun, on the Yucatan Peninsula of Mexico, has little in common with those residing in the central highlands of the state of Chiapas. This is where the modern Zapatista movement is rooted, and their revolutionary activity has been constant since the movement’s birth in 1994. These revolutionaries borrowed the name “Zapatista” from the much earlier movement (1910-1919) led by Emiliano Zapata.<sup>36</sup> His famous cry for “*Tierra y Libertad*,” or land and liberty, gained Zapata a large following, and it is the basis for a modern revival of the Zapata spirit.

Chiapas is the poorest state in Mexico. Its population consists of Mayan peoples of various degrees and mixtures, including mestizos. At the bottom of its tribal stratification are the indigenous *campesinas* of the Highlands. They have lived a marginalized existence throughout the centuries, but have striven together to preserve their individual cultures. These tribal peoples speak a number of native languages, “...including Tzotzil, Tzeltal, Tojolobal, Ch’ol, and Zoque, among others.”<sup>37</sup> Most of the females in this region know only their native tongue—not Spanish. Many of the men know both the native tongue and Spanish, and this is indicative of the micro power structure within this very disconnected and remote region of Mexico. Not until the close of the 20<sup>th</sup> century did the women of Chiapas make a concerted effort toward greater empowerment, striving to set aside some of the negative but traditional practices of the elder females. The transition has been difficult.

Women of the Chiapas highlands have been raised with a strong work ethic “...as midwives, healers, weavers of festival garments, and as coleaders of fiestas.”<sup>38</sup> They take pride in their efforts to support families and villages, and emphatically strive to pass their native

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<sup>36</sup> Emiliano Zapata (1879-1919) was a peasant horse trainer from Anenecuilco, Morelos. He became a leader during the Mexican Revolution, from 1910 to 1919. His goal was to retake lands which had been confiscated by *hacendados*. His famous slogan was “*Tierra y Libertad*,” or land and liberty.

<http://latinamericanhistory.about.com/od/themexicanrevolution/p/08zapatabio.htm>

<sup>37</sup> Christine Eber and Christine Kovic, *Women of Chiapas; Making History in Times of Struggle and Hope* (2003), 2

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

cultures and spirituality down through the generations. Yet in spite of a co-gendered spirit of cooperation in this preservation, violence against females—especially rape—is commonplace in the Highlands. Only in the last few decades have concerted efforts to end these perversions been pursued as a collective female effort. Elder females traditionally focused on overcoming economic and racial oppression, believing these were the first essential steps toward protecting the family structure. Perhaps they believed greater equality and prosperity for the entire tribe would relieve the domestic violence. However, young women of the last few cohorts have been busy striving for choice in marriage, economic opportunity and parity, as well as (along with the men) reformation at the national level.

By 1989, many women of the village of San Cristóbal de Las Casas were fed up with the local government's unresponsiveness to violence against women. They formed an association known as the "Women's Group of San Cristóbal de Las Casas," whose immediate goal was to seek justice for a woman who had been gang raped. While this was their first order of business, the group slowly spread their wings over the next few years, including "...both mestiza and indigenous women," in order to address all concerns unique to women of their region. By 1996, this group became known as COLEM. They felt empowered, working as an association; in numbers there was strength. Meanwhile, the local economy faltered throughout the 1980s and 1990s.

During these decades, the Mexican government struggled to bring about widespread modernization through new economic policies. This top-down effort premiered under the presidency of Miguel de La Madrid (1982-1988). It seemed that sudden growth could only come about through "Mexico's reinsertion into the global economy..."<sup>39</sup> with assistance from the United States and the IMF. As in all global capitalist models, Mexico's policies reached across borders, inviting foreign investors; and the presence of MNCs increased throughout Mexico. As James D. Nations wrote in 1994:

*It is not difficult to imagine a Tzeltal or Tojolbal farmer sizing up his choices: he can move to San Cristobal de las Casas and sell popsicles from a pushcart, he can work for a cattleman punching cows, or he can rebel against a situation that seems to have him trapped. That hundreds of farmers chose to rebel should come as no surprise.<sup>40</sup>*

Under new economic guidelines, Mexico reached across borders; foreign investments and the presence of MNCs increased throughout the country, edging out local markets. The globalized marketplace blinded the government to the needs of their nations' poorest citizens; and when peasants can lower their expectations no further and survive, they are forced to revolt. When the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) passed on January 1, 1994, both the men and women of Chiapas were prepared to take action. They formed the "Ejército Zapatista

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<sup>39</sup> Eber and Kovic, 4.

<sup>40</sup> James D. Nations, "The Ecology of the Zapatista Revolt," *Cultural Survival Quarterly* 18 (1994), 33.

de Liberación Nacional (Zapatista Army of National Liberation or the EZLN).<sup>41</sup> No longer submissive to a distant and nonresponsive government, and foreseeing death to their way of life, the highlanders chose revolt.

EZLN members donned the black ski masks reminiscent of Emiliano Zapata and formed a military force—the men accepting women among their ranks. ‘The cry that went out from Chiapas on January 1 was “Enough is enough.”’ Men and women worked together to formulate dialogues and demands to present to the Mexican government. However, the women’s purpose within the Zapatista movement, while all-encompassing for their region, was also specific to the needs and rights of women. The Zapatistas met first at San Cristóbal in 1994, and there females like the Tzotzil known as Comandante Ramona created “The Revolutionary Women’s Law,” consisting of ten rights for women. In essence, those rights were the right to “participate in the revolutionary struggle,” to “work and receive a just salary,” the rights to choose marriage, childbirth, education, equal participation in their communities and military, and to look out for their own health and welfare (including an end to rape and violence).<sup>42</sup>

The EZLN “...met in the Lacandon rain forest in August of 1994 to discuss civil society’s involvement in Mexico’s transition to democracy.”<sup>43</sup> Sending their message to Mexico City, the group captured the attention of then president, Ernesto Zedillo, who at first seemed conciliatory. By February of 1995, however, Zedillo broke his original truce “...sending thousands of troops to the Lacandon rain forest to detain Zapatista leaders.”<sup>44</sup> Anyone sympathetic to the Chiapas rebels became targets of the paramilitary, and eventually thousands were arrested and detained as refugees. Under militarization, “...violence toward women increased.”<sup>45</sup> The military forced indigenous women to feed them and do their laundry. Rape was common, and many females were forced into prostitution, something formerly unheard of in Chiapas. Oppression escalated and reached its zenith as “...over 100 people were killed in the violence between PRD (Party of the Democratic Revolution) supporters and paramilitaries from August 1995 to September 1996.”<sup>46</sup> A few months later, at Los Naranjos (December 22, 1996) a five-hour shooting rampage resulted in the “...massacre of 21 women, 9 men, and 15 children...”<sup>47</sup> Nevertheless, the heart of the EZLN continued to beat strong, reaching out to the international community through the United Nations, for assistance. As Richard H. Robbins writes:

*In Chiapas, the Zapatistas used the rhetoric and principles that gave the Mexican government and the ruling political party, the PRI, its original legitimacy...The Zapatistas made it clear that the government betrayed the very principles that*

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<sup>41</sup> Nations, 33.

<sup>42</sup> Eber and Kovic, 23.

<sup>43</sup> Eber and Kovic, 11.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

*gave it legitimacy in the beginning, even going so far as to negate the very laws and rationale that the Mexican Revolution was fought for and reinstating the land alienation that created the conditions for the Mexican revolution to begin with.*<sup>48</sup>

Since 1997, the EZLN have remained active on behalf of their region's social and health problems, as well as economic and political needs. Meeting in Oaxaca, Mexico in 1997, the EZLN "...discussed issues such as rape, the abuses of the military, indigenous traditions, and access to education for women and girls."<sup>49</sup> In 1999, determined to broadcast their plight to a wider audience, "...5,000 civilian supporters of the Zapatistas traveled throughout Mexico to conduct a consultation on the San Andrés Accords, the agreement that the Zapatistas and government representatives had forged from the peace talks that were suspended on August 29, 1996."<sup>50</sup> With the election of President Vicente Fox in 2000 (breaking the 71-year hold the PRI party held on Mexican politics), the Zapatistas hoped that change was at hand. They formed a delegation and conducted a seventeen-day march to Mexico City in 2001, in an effort to have the San Andrés Accords reinstated. Wearing the symbolic black masks, they were an imposing group; out of fear, numerous congressional leaders opposed their admission. EZLN leaders announced that they would take their message to the European Union, and Congress eventually voted to allow them admission (by a narrow vote). Armed and masked, "...a group of 23 *commandantes* of the EZLN...entered Mexico's *Palacio Legislativo* (National Congress)."<sup>51</sup>

By the time the EZLN were allowed to enter, half of the congressional members had exited. Nevertheless, Commandante Esther, an indigenous woman from Chiapas addressed the remaining congressional leaders in her own native tongue (Tzotzil). She aptly described the discrimination, humiliation, indifference and lack of essential services the Indians of the Chiapas highlands had endured throughout history. She described the absence of good medical care (hospitals and clinics) with resoluteness and humility, stating that, "...My voice doesn't lack respect for anyone, but we didn't come to ask for handouts. My voice comes to seek justice, liberty, and democracy for all the indigenous peoples."<sup>52</sup> The EZLN delegation went on to outline the dialogue by which they could begin new negotiations with the Mexican government and President Fox. Among those issues were release of the Chiapas rebels arrested in 1995, and the exodus of the paramilitary troops. Unfortunately, little progress has occurred since making their demands. In fact, even human rights missionaries to Chiapas have lost ground.

Along with the 2000 election of President Vicente Fox, a non-PRI party member was elected as governor of Chiapas. Hope swelled among the *campesinas*, that change was eminent, as Chiapas Governor Pablo Salazar Mendiguchia called for reconciliation between the national and state governments. In a symbolic gesture, the Fox administration released a few Zapatistas from prison, but most remained in captivity. As years passed, what continued to be apparent to

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<sup>48</sup> Richard H. Robbins, *Global Problems and the Culture of Capitalism*, 5<sup>th</sup> edition (2005), 288.

<sup>49</sup> Eber and Kovic, 11.

<sup>50</sup> Eber and Kovic, 13.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

the highlanders of Chiapas was this fact: if any progress was to be made for their region, the Zapatistas alone would be the authors of such change. Led by Comandante Ramona (author of EZLN's "Revolutionary Women's Law"), women continued to make strides toward gender liberation. However, with each step forward there were new challenges.

In 2006, Ramona died of apparent kidney failure. Like so many active and dedicated female reformers, her exact age is unknown, and unimportant. Followers believe she was around 47 years old. What has been most notable since her passing is that violence against women has increased markedly. In spite of these threats, the Zapatista women will not be silenced. They don their black masks and continue working toward reform, especially for their children's sakes. Two women of the region (who prefer to remain anonymous) reported in 2011: "In our zone before the Zapatista struggle things were different. We had no right to decide who we married. And when we married we were mistreated, beaten and humiliated by our husbands, and more when they were drunk."<sup>53</sup> Because of women's associations such as COLEM and EZLN, the plight of women has improved—at least in the domestic realm. However, this alteration in the male/female power structure among Chiapas indigenes does not diminish the dangers to females from outside the community.

Zapatista women are increasingly targeted by paramilitary groups. Soneile Humn reports that "Rape has been on the rise since the uprising, as a military tactic of terrorism in indigenous villages."<sup>54</sup> As Alena Hontarava concludes, "The sporadic violence aimed at the human rights and female EZLN activists is but a pathetic attempt by scared and desperate perpetrators to silence the women and delay the simmering changes now taking place in Mayan communities."<sup>55</sup> A new generation of Mayan women is expressing this progress through their art, writing and entrepreneurialism. Whether beaten, raped or otherwise terrorized, the women of Chiapas refuse to give up the ground they have taken by force. Now squarely positioned in the driver's seat of revolutionary reform, the women of Chiapas have chosen only one direction—forward

### **Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, Argentina**

Argentina is a country whose past and present are both marked by struggle, turbulence, beauty, tragedy, romance and survival. Its emotionally charged history is partially explained by the striking diversity of its citizens and residents. Indigenous peoples, Spanish conquerors, and miscegenous blends of the two lived together unequally during the colonial period (approximately 1543 to 1816).<sup>56</sup> After its independence from Spain (July 9, 1816)<sup>57</sup>, more European nationals relocated to Argentina, over the next two centuries. Today, the indigenes,

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<sup>53</sup> Alena Hontarava, "Mexico: Failure to Silence EZLN Activists," June 21, 2011, 2.

<sup>54</sup> Hontarava, 2.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>56</sup> "Argentina Autentica," *Footprint Travel Guides*. Web. 18 July, 2012.  
<http://www.argentinaautentica.com/colonialrule.php>

<sup>57</sup> "Argentina Autentica," *Footprint Travel Guides*. Web. 18 July, 2012.  
<http://www.argentinaautentica.com/independence.php>

Spaniards, mestizos, Italians, Germans, Jewish, English, a variety of other European transplants, and various Americans call Argentina home. These diverse peoples are spread across a landscape which offers up some of the world's most awe-inspiring vistas, including mountains, waterfalls, subtropical rainforests, glaciers, glacial lakes, the central grasslands known as the Pampas, and the rich variety which is Patagonia. This broad and beautifully contradictory landscape that is Argentina seems to foretell the manifold nature of its residents.

Carefully woven into the rich but rugged fabric of its national consciousness are the deep distinctions between Argentina's citizenry. The greatest divisions today, however, are not due to race and ethnicity. Instead, modern Argentines divide along class lines, and each social sector consists of a large variety of national origins, though pure indigenes and mestizos tend to dominate the lowest class. Chasms between the elite class, the middle class and the distant lower classes become evident when discussing political and social issues among any of these groups. While it is true that divisions exist between the very wealthy and very poor in all other modern nations, the salient question is, why did Argentina's 20<sup>th</sup> century political struggles take such tumultuous turns, for so many decades? Clarity is difficult to achieve; however, certain connecting social factors point in a common direction.

Early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, rural Argentine natives struggled to maintain land and labor rights taken from them through a system biased toward both its wealthy, landed citizens and immigrants with money to invest. The nation's economic need fostered this situation, and more large ranches surfaced across the Pampas regions of Argentina. While local indigenous and mestizo cultures within Argentina united to protect their land rights, major political factions in the capital city of Buenos Aires have historically fended for the rights of the elite classes—wherever they are located throughout Argentina, and whatever nationality. Money was power in a Third World economy ready to be exploited; and through foreign investment, Argentina clawed its way out of poverty and into the position of a First World economy by the end of the Great War. By the end of the Second World War, Argentina's economy was thriving, and measured eighth in the world.<sup>58</sup>

Nevertheless, when one takes even a cursory look at Argentine politics for any length of time, the most pervasive factor is that it seems to be a military in possession of a country. When post World War II working class citizens of various national origins began to educate themselves in social systems advocating the rights of working people, schools and universities began to teach socialism, and others banned together in union activity, the Argentine military took notice and took action on several occasions. Pivotal points in this history occurred during the first and second presidencies of Juan Domingo Perón. Keeping peace by suppressing extremist groups has led to several modern military coups and a rapid succession of presidents—at one point five

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<sup>58</sup> Marguerite Feitlowitz, *A Lexicon of Terror; Argentina and the Legacies of Torture*, © 1998, 4.

presidents in a period of only two months.<sup>59</sup> As Marguerite Feitlowitz states in her monograph, *A Lexicon of Terror*:

*Argentina is supremely enigmatic, even—perhaps especially—to Argentines, who routinely describe it as ‘schizophrenic’ and ‘surreal’...Due to its vast expanses of fertile land, Argentina is one of the few countries that should never need to import food.....Yet for all these endowments Argentina has been consistently self-destructive—economically, politically, socially. Politicians have the habit of consuming not only their enemies, but restive allies as well.*<sup>60</sup>

In fact, the rapid overturn of dictators, presidents and military juntas suggests a society which is more feudal than modern. Argentina’s emotional tie to peace through military might has continually mitigated progress. Furthermore, when peace emerges, it is not threaded throughout society. The result is an uneven leap forward, with a series of complicated bureaucracies which do not communicate well with one another. All of this retards the country’s complete rise from the Third World status to which it once again descended by the 1970s. “The traditional triangle consists of the landowning ‘oligarchy,’ the Catholic Church, and the military, which was modeled on the Praetorian Guard.”<sup>61</sup> Unfortunately, none of these three ringleaders communicate well with all of the varied peoples of Argentina.

Alain Rouquié summarized modern Argentina succinctly when he stated that “Everyone in Argentina wants their own colonel,”<sup>62</sup> which suggests that a military cabal is always the solution of preference. Perhaps this is why Juan Domingo Perón attempted to appeal to every sector of Argentine society, in his bid for the presidency, his continued desire to remain in office, and an appeal to the majority—the poor working classes. This, of course, must forecast the downfall of someone whose politics attempt to appeal to too vast an audience. While Perón’s presidency “was notable both for achieving social justice for the working class, women, and other neglected sectors of the population and for the authoritarian methods he bequeathed to future government...” he conversely “...drew upon nationalist phobias against communism and working-class revolution, and on corporatist doctrine that reflected a Christian view of social justice.”<sup>63</sup> This is the contradiction at the heart of Argentinian politics. It is not only an enigma, as Feitlowitz states, but a contemporary conundrum which leaves open the door to chaos at any given moment. Nevertheless, the Perón years left an indelible imprint upon Argentine society which cannot be erased.

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<sup>59</sup>“Argentina Autentica,” *Footprint Travel Guides*, 18 July, 2012.

<http://www.argentinaautentica.com/twentyfirstcentury.php>

<sup>60</sup> Feitlowitz, 4.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 5

<sup>62</sup> Alain Rouquié, *Pouvoir militaire et société politique en république Argentine* (Paris: Presses de la Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques, 1978).

<sup>63</sup> Marguerite Guzman Bouvard, *Revolutionizing Motherhood; The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo*, © 1994, 49.

Perón's presidency (first years, 1946-1955) represented Argentina's first modern attempt to create democratic institutions which were truly egalitarian, allowing the working classes of Argentina a fair shot at the goal of at least minimal economic success. They in turn reacted with a fierce loyalty which would never die. "Before Perón, labor had negligible political influence. Under his tutelage the General Confederation of Labor (CGT) became one of the most powerful organizations in the country."<sup>64</sup> His advocacy for unionization, combined with concerns for the rural poor, forecast disaster for Perón.

Realizing that Argentina's fertile landscape could yield crops in amounts comparable to other modern countries, such as France or Germany, Perón devised a plan. If agricultural laborers were offered better pay, the relationship between the working and owning classes might improve (native resentment of elite Europeans who had "stolen" their lands over two centuries still existed). Perón imposed a new law which provided a minimum wage for rural workers (the "Statute of the Peon"), and "...Argentina's landowning oligarchy"<sup>65</sup> reacted like a betrayed lover. They insisted that the lowest classes required so little for sustenance, that they did not need a guaranteed minimum wage. The *Sociedad Rural* had already determined, in 1944, that the peon's "...material needs are sometimes so limited that the use to which any surplus will be put is of little social interest."<sup>66</sup> In other words, the owning classes were thriving sufficiently enough that increased agricultural output was not a priority for them. Personal incomes were more important than an increase in Gross Domestic Product. Furthermore, they referred "...to peons as if they were animals,"<sup>67</sup> and rejected Perón's policies.

Nevertheless, Perón continued constructing a series of nationalistic policies which he called *Justicia*, urging first a vast increase in industrial production. Further inspired by his wife Eva's devotion to her commoner roots, Perón designed a welfare state which limited the urban work day to eight hours, set minimum wage scales, provided for paid vacations, and encouraged unionization. With characteristic Argentine "schizophrenia," he focused on individual rights while attempting to achieve his goals through collectivism. The legacy of Perón's first term as president was an economy based upon industrial output. After Eva died in July of 1952, however, he was uninspired, the economy faltered, and he was forced to develop a new five-year plan. This called for massive increases in agricultural output.<sup>68</sup>

Unfortunately, Perón's second term in office was marred by events emanating from his need to build support against opposition Catholic forces. He chose an appeal to young people, involvement with a young fourteen-year-old girl named Nelly Rivas—further assuring his fall from grace among conservative Catholics. Rabid rhetoric between the Church and Perón ensued. This brought an end to Perón's presidency, as he escaped in order to survive. He fled first to

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<sup>64</sup> Bouvard, 49.

<sup>65</sup> Eduardo Galeano, *Open Veins of Latin America*, © 1973, 1997, 129.

<sup>66</sup> Galeano, 129.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>68</sup> Peter Winn, *Americas: The Changing Face of Latin America and the Caribbean*, 1999, Summary.

Paraguay, later to Venezuela, the Dominican Republic, and eventually settled in Spain for the remainder of his exile.<sup>69</sup>

From 1955 until 1973, Juan Domingo Perón continued to influence Argentine politics, as he communicated from his various homes. The power of his followers, both Perónists and Montenaros<sup>70</sup>, was constantly checked by the Argentine military. An economy marked by hyper-inflation, a response of frozen wages by President Amburu, intermittent monetary injections from other countries and the IMF, and periodic executions of Perónists, depict this chaotic period.<sup>71</sup> Eventually, the military relented and—due to increasing pressure from approximately four different militant groups—invited the ever popular Juan Perón to return to Argentina. With characteristic charisma, he wooed and romanced his way back into the presidency, where he would accomplish little before his death on July 1, 1974. His Vice President and wife, Isabel, would wage a meager attempt to run the country—until the military decided once and for all to end the pretense that Argentina was governed by anyone other than its military. The Argentine Air Force took control in 1976, and forever changed the direction of thousands of Argentinians' lives.

The three-man military junta which took control of Argentina in 1976 did so under the guise of “the gentlemen of the coup.”<sup>72</sup> These three “gentlemen” were President Jorge Rafael Videla (an army general), Admiral Emilio E. Massera (of the navy), and Brigadier General Orlando R. Agosti (of the air force). In reality, they began a scourge of secretive violence which haunted great segments of Argentine society from 1976 until 1983. With intolerance toward any oppositional activity or ideology, the junta announced its objectives:

*This was a fight not just for Argentina but, the generals stressed, for “Western, Christian civilization.” By meeting its “sacred responsibility” to forever rid the earth of “subversion,” Argentina “would join the concert of nations.” Argentina was the theater for “World War III,” which had to be fought against those whose activities—and thoughts—were deemed “subversive.” Intellectual, writer, journalist, trade unionist, psychologist, social worker became “categories of guilt.” One of the first laws laid down by the junta decreed that workers could be fired without cause and without any right to indemnification. Strikes were forbidden, and the bank accounts of the General Confederation of Labor immediately seized. Labor unions, professional guilds, teachers’ associations, even student councils were specifically targeted in new statutes published on the front page of every major daily. The junta was particularly obsessed with the*

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 6-8.

<sup>70</sup> Mitchell Abidor, in his online article “The Montoneros” describes this movement as follows: “The main sources of its ideology were liberation theology, and the left-wing Perónism of the ‘descamisados,’ the shirtless who were Eva Peron’s base of support....In their early days their primary demand was for the return of Peron to both Argentina and power (*Peron Vuelve!*) and an end to the illegitimate governments that had succeeded him.” p. 1: <http://www.marxists.org/history/argentina/montoneros/introduction.htm>

<sup>71</sup> “Argentina, from Juan and Eva Peron to the Disappeared,” 6-8.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 7.

*hidden enemy. Suspects were “disappeared” in order to be exposed (and then annihilated) within a network of some 340 secret torture centers and concentration camps.*<sup>73</sup>

Though Argentines were immediately made aware that they were living under martial law, none could have guessed what lay in store for them when this harsh military began its Dirty War, disappearing an estimated 30,000 people. Marguerite Feitlowitz writes that “The Dirty War happened because, in some measure, every part of Argentine society allowed it to.”<sup>74</sup> She is quick to qualify this statement by declaring that clearly every individual cannot be held accountable. However, many of the Old Guard elites applauded the Argentine military as they ousted Isabel Perón and announced their tripartite rule. They imagined an end to the chaos of revolt, even if it meant rule by oligarchy. As Jaime Malamud (President Alfonsín’s military advisor) stated after the junta’s downfall, in the February, 1985 issue of *Mother Jones*: “Look, this is a fascist society. We have to change its authoritarian structure...And in the process we have to let a lot of people get away with [crimes].” While Malamud may have been correct about the fascist nature of Argentine governing practices, history—and the Mothers—would prove that the military responsible for the heinous tortures of 1976-1983 would not be excused. As Marguerite Guzman Bouvard writes:

*Historically, the justification for state-sponsored terror on a mass scale and for the practice of genocide has been the naming of the other: the Jews in Nazi Germany, the Armenians in Turkey, the Kurds in Iraq, and the subversive in Argentina. After the fall of the junta, Ramón Camps, former chief of police of the province of Buenos Aires, claimed, “We didn’t disappear persons but subversives.”<sup>75</sup> Such an officially designated outsider is thus reduced to a less-than-human status, justifying the violation of his or her every right.<sup>76</sup>*

This is where the story of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo begins, a story which continues to this very day. Each Mother whose loved ones were whisked away in the middle of the night reacted immediately, decisively, and vociferously against their disappearance. Placing their own lives in peril, they insisted upon answers—from the local policing agencies, governments, the national government, the military, the Church, and any friends or relatives who might have answers. The rapidity with which the targeted victims disappeared was so alarming that friends and relatives were often reluctant to assist the mothers in their search, so fearful were they of similar treatment. Stories of these abductions continued over the next seven years, as the pattern unfolded:

*The disappearance of their children represented a watershed for the women who came together to form the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo. When they began their*

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<sup>73</sup> Feitlowitz, 7-8.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>75</sup> Madres, *Newspaper*, May 1988.

<sup>76</sup> Bouvard, 36.

*frantic search for their children, they were primarily homemakers, content with their absorption in family and household and expressing little interest in the world beyond. They had been socialized into these roles by a traditional Argentine society that regards the male as the dominant figure, the sole participant in public life and the undisputed head of the home.....these Mothers did not realize that they were embarking on a journey which would transform them into political activists—that the act of searching for their children and their subsequent union in this search would lead them to an independent analysis of the system that had made such a tragedy possible.*<sup>77</sup>

Collectively, surviving Mothers still mourn the loss of sons, daughters, sons-in-law, daughters-in-law, grandchildren, spouses, siblings, other Mothers who were past leaders, nuns who attempted to assist in discovery, and reporters who spread their messages of hope, anger and conviction. Together and united, however, they have changed the political dialogue within Argentina, and with other nations—about the nature of the human rights violations the military junta committed. During those first days of horror, they wandered as individuals living in a nightmare, their hearts broken but seeking answers. In due time, they learned to share their grief.

As Dr. Mirta Mántaras<sup>78</sup> explained during interviews in January, 2012 (in Buenos Aires), Argentines were living under a state of siege immediately after the military takeover in 1976.<sup>79</sup> This meant that public gatherings were absolutely forbidden. When desperate mothers—turning to public officials and church officials on a daily basis—became aware of other mothers looking for answers, they began to gather and increase in number. The mothers eventually resorted to meeting in the Plaza de Mayo. However, they were under constant surveillance and told by military police to keep moving. They began to walk, in order to talk. The frightened mothers shared their stories as they kept walking, in pairs, eventually changing partners in order to bond with more mothers.

Exchanging stories did not remove the pain in their hearts; however, it forged within them—and between them—the strength and fortitude to continue their search. They needed specific answers: Where were their offspring taken? What happened to them after their disappearance? Were they still alive? If not, where were their bodies? As Matilde Mellibovsky wrote in 1997, “We mothers have never been given an appointment to inform us officially of what became of our children.....They simply expected us to presume that as the logical consequence of such a prolonged absence they had died.”<sup>80</sup> Instead, Mellibovsky decided she must share the mothers’ stories by gathering the personal testimonies about their children, as a constant memorial of their disappearances—not their deaths.

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<sup>77</sup> Bouvard, 65.

<sup>78</sup> Dr. Mirta Mántaras is a human rights attorney who has been representing many of the Mothers of the Plaza since 1976. She was present when the military trials began in Spain, and continues working in the Buenos Aires courts today—representing Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo and Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo.

<sup>79</sup> Sarah Burns’s interview with Dr. Mirta Mántaras, January 29, 2012.

<sup>80</sup> Matilde Mellibovsky, *Circle Of Love Over Death*, © 1997, 121.

In her memoir, *Circle Of Love Over Death*, Mellibovsky has recorded the testimonies of twenty-three of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo (which includes her own). Collectively, they are primarily the stories of teenagers and young people in their twenties who were compassionate toward Argentines living in poverty; they envisioned an Argentine government and future which addressed those inequities. The mothers' testimonies about their children's abductions also prove that the abductions actually began in 1975, prior to the military takeover. Mellibovsky states that, prior to her daughter's abduction, Graciela had shared information about detentions and abductions, "...or a disappearance every time she ran into somebody on the street or at the university,"<sup>81</sup> throughout 1975. The testimony of Esther Aracela Lado de Sanchez also reflects this truth.

Esther's son, Enrique Sanchez, was just 21 years old when he was abducted. Having been unjustly jailed and eventually released without charges, Enrique became an instant target for surveillance. At that time, it was common practice to release prisoners and later kill them on the streets. The last time Esther saw her son was when they lunched at home together. When he left home that day, just three months after his arrest in January 21, 1975, she never saw him again. His mother searched in vain, going to the Government House on numerous occasions. She was eventually told, "Señora, maybe he will never reappear."<sup>82</sup> Hitting one wall after another, Esther began to feel like she was going insane. She stated that, "I didn't want to go even crazier." Her only refuge was to eventually join the other grieving mothers in the Plaza de Mayo, where they cried together, walked in a circle of love, and gained power.

There is the case of Nestor Juan Agustín Zurita, who was also abducted August 1, 1975. Juan was 25 years old at the time. His mother, Carmen Robles de Zurita described Juan as a sensitive young man, always putting "other people's needs" before his own.<sup>83</sup> Juan was at home, in his bedroom, the night he was abducted. Officers busted down the gate and front door of their home. They demanded that Carmen turn over all of her weapons. In puzzlement, she stated she had no weapons. Officers charged into Juan's bedroom and demanded that he get dressed, then took him away. Carmen's search, like that of all mothers, began the very next day. Because of her constant activity and inquiry, Carmen's daughter, María Rosa Zurita was also abducted, on November 1, 1975, at the age of 21. Revenge abductions were common during this Dirty War, as second and sometimes third children in one household were disappeared. However, it did not thwart the efforts of the mothers. Carmen stated that she "searched high and low in this country, we have gone abroad, we have complained to the Church, which is the party that's given us fewer answers than anybody else. They have never contacted us about anything, nobody has concerned himself about these cases, not in Tucumán City, nor anywhere else."<sup>84</sup> Neither of the Zurita siblings was accounted for.

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<sup>81</sup> Mellibovsky, 223.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>84</sup> Mellibovsky, 65.

The daughter of Lola Weinschelbaun de Rubino exhibited a spirit of reform common to this new generation of middle to upper middle class young people. She was abducted on June 23, 1976 at the age of 21. Raquel frequently spent her days with other youths who visited the nearby shanty towns, in order to assist in public works projects. These young people "...dug drainage outlets...cleared brush and they shared *matés*."<sup>85</sup> For this compassionate activity, Raquel and her friends were considered subversive. She was disappeared.

Generally, the stories of abduction occurred in the dead of night, carried out by highly armed men whose appearance suppressed any retaliation. They were threatening specters, who demanded silence and compliance. Under the nose of neighbors and nearby businesses, the silent invasions continued unchallenged for years. Josefina Gandolfi de Salgado's testimony differs from the common model. In the case of the Salgado family, their journey came to a conclusion. Josefina's son, José María Salgado, disappeared on March 12, 1977, and they later found out he was murdered on June 2, 1977.<sup>86</sup> She and her husband were eventually told by the Armed Forces Command that, "...the car in which he was fleeing along with two other 'subversives' was intercepted." After continued insistence, on July 27, 1977, Josefina, her husband and daughter were taken to a morgue, where her son's coffin would be opened. Her husband could not bear to look upon his son's dead body. Instead, she and her daughter remained alone with José:

*He had been sadistically destroyed alive. It was hard to recognize him. I think it was his light brown hair, abundant and soft, that told us it was our dear boy. Both eyes were missing, and his mouth was open in a terrible grimace of pain, showing his destroyed teeth, which had no resemblance at all to his perfectly white ones, visible only a short time ago when my son laughed in his frank and easy way. Consumed, he looked as if it was not two months but years of deprivation that had gone by in order to turn this twenty-two year old boy into the suffering body we saw before us.....How they lied to almost the whole country! How easy it was to make us look crazy, those of us who made a fuss so that they would give us back our loved ones!*<sup>87</sup>

There are hundreds of stories of torture similar to that suffered by José Salgado, scenes so despicable that they are difficult to put on paper. Many have compared their methods to those of Nazi Germany; they could also be compared to methods used during the Spanish Inquisition, using modern tools and technology. A man known as Julián the Turk was one of the most notorious perpetrators of crimes against humanity. His torture methods were especially heinous because of the number of people he tortured, some of whom survived to describe the abuse.

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 106.

<sup>87</sup> Mellibovsky, 107.

When Julián the Turk was interviewed on national television in May of 1995, one of his victims, Mario Villani was present as well. Villani, a physicist, was one of few abducted intelligentsia who survived the Dirty War. He listened as the Turk coldly testified on the program, *Telenoche*: “‘The norm was to kill everyone, and anyone kidnapped was tortured.’ He concluded that ‘torture didn’t always work, it left people too destroyed’ to give any information.”<sup>88</sup> However, the most revealing statement about Julián’s nature came from Mario Vallani, describing his personal observances:

*They had left the door open...and there was Julián standing over a prisoner they had naked, laid out on his belly, with his legs hanging down over the end of the table. Julián was torturing this man with an electric cable which he had shorn of its insulation and charged to 220 volts. It seems this wasn’t enough for Julián for he then inserted a stick into the man’s anus and then tortured him some more with the cable. As the man’s body writhed and jolted, the stick tore apart his intestines, and he died.*<sup>89</sup>

Perhaps even more absurd than the Turk’s methods were the thousands of night flights over the Atlantic, in which Navy officers disposed of victims, calling them “fish food.” One such officer was a Navy Captain by the name of Adolfo Francisco Scilingo who, sickened by the entire experience, constantly remembered the one night when he almost lost his own life. Scilingo was a Navy Captain during the days of the military junta, serving at ESMA.<sup>90</sup> The normal procedure during these night flights was to shoot the victims with drugs, so that they could not offer up resistance, but were still awake during their drop from thousands of feet, into the cold Atlantic. “Scilingo declared that virtually every officer took part in the flights, which were considered ‘a form of communion,’ a supreme act we did for the country.”<sup>91</sup> Prior to forcing the victims from the aircraft, they were drugged, stripped of their clothing, then pushed from the aircraft:

*‘Once the prisoners were asleep—this is very morbid, we undressed them, and two of us would drag one prisoner down the aisle and then push him out into the sky...’ Scilingo shoved thirty individuals to their deaths: thirteen on the first flight, seventeen on the second. Among them was a sixty-five-year-old man, a sixteen-year-old boy, and two pregnant women in their early twenties. On his first flight, Scilingo slipped and nearly fell out of the plane with a prisoner who was struggling and would not let go.*<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Feitlowitz, 210.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> The Navy Mechanics School, in Buenos Aires.

<sup>91</sup> Feitlowitz, 196.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 196-197.

After 22 years in the military and far too many night flights, Scilingo decided to retire from the military. Told he was being promoted to a higher position, he at first refused, explaining that he no longer had the stomach to carry out such torture. When he attempted to retire, he was told he had two more years before he could leave with full pension. Scilingo decided he must put in the two necessary years of work. By that time, the military mistrusted him, and fired him without retirement. Over the next few years, Scilingo lost everything. His wife went to live with Scilingo's mother, and Scilingo moved to Buenos Aires—where he was unemployable. He had nothing to lose by testifying during the military trials, and only his self-respect to regain. In testimonies, he declared that "...during his two years at the ESMA (1976-77), 'a hundred Wednesdays, between 1500 and 2000 people' were thrown into the sea."<sup>93</sup> It is obvious by the following story that prison torture tactics had been well underway prior to the junta's rule, and that the military was untouchable.

Daniel Victor Antokoletz was 39 years old when he and his wife, Liliana were abducted. Liliana reappeared a week later. What was Daniel's crime? He was an accomplished attorney, who specialized in legal research. Teaching for fourteen years at the University of Belgrano's Law School, Daniel was an Associate Professor, also acting as a defense attorney for "political prisoners in Argentina and in Chile, among them Senator Enrique Erro..."<sup>94</sup> While Antokoletz was blatantly standing up to the Argentine military, other knowledgeable critics were under constant surveillance. It was dangerous to have inside information about the harsh tactics of the military, which became increasingly paranoid about conspiratorial actions by 1976. "The censors of the junta were always on the lookout for suspicious terms, like 'conditions,' 'contradiction,' 'criticism,' 'relative,' and 'reactionary.'"<sup>95</sup>

The military junta was deeply concerned about protecting their image, realizing their Dirty War operated outside the letter of Argentine legal tradition. Many countries, especially across Latin America, contributed money to support the junta, believing the violence of subversive revolutionaries should be squelched. It was imperative, therefore, that they silence all reports of their covert activities, especially to human rights advocates in other countries. When the editor of *La Opinión*, Jacobo Timerman, began to publish "lists of the disappeared," he was "abducted, taken to a detention center, and ultimately forced into exile. Robert Cox, the editor of the *Buenos Aires Herald*, which also reported the abductions, was hounded out of the country. Radio and television newscasters were usually silenced, although Ariel Delgado, a brave radio commentator and program director, continued to speak of the disappearances until he was forced to flee to Uruguay."<sup>96</sup> From that country, Delgado continued to broadcast until his life was once again threatened. He proceeded to travel and live outside of Argentina for the remaining years of

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 196.

<sup>94</sup> Feitlowitz, 18.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>96</sup> Bouvard, 31.

the Dirty War. During those years, 93 journalists were disappeared, according to the Mothers of the Plaza (they did this accounting, and published their findings in 1989).<sup>97</sup>

The weeks and months which followed the disappearances of their children filled the mothers with a feeling of helplessness and hopelessness, filled with worry over their children's conditions. One after another insisted upon audiences with priests, bishops, local police, even the president or other government officials. Eventually the Ministry of the Interior brought some of the Mothers together, but not for a good purpose on his part. As his secretary gathered information on each of the mothers, they began to realize the danger of the interview. One of these Mothers, Azucena de Villaflor de De Vincente eventually decided all Mothers should come together in a different location—her home. These Mothers would eventually become known as *La Línea Fundadora* (or the founding line), and they initiated the practice of gathering in the Plaza de Mayo for the circular walks and talks. Slowly, word of their gatherings spread. Today's most notorious member (and leader) of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo would learn of their existence after her son, Jorgé, was abducted on the night of February 8, 1977. Eventually, Hebe de Bonafini was told by a surviving prisoner that Jorgé had been held only a few blocks from her home—so close, but completely unreachable.

The day of Jorgé's disappearance, Hebe de Bonafini began her exhaustive search. She sought the help of "...Monsignor Antonio Plaza, the bishop of La Plata. Bishop Plaza brought her into his office, where he introduced her to a retired policeman. Although he had promised Hebe she would get information about her son, it soon became clear to her that the bishop and his policeman friend were more interested in grilling her and trying to get information about her son's friends than in helping her."<sup>98</sup> Hebe departed quickly. There have been many other instances in which mothers turned for help to the parish priest or other church authorities, whose responses were stoic and mistrustful. Only a few were outspoken supporters of the Mothers, placing themselves in great danger. As Bouvard discovered, "Two bishops and twenty priests, nuns and seminarians were disappeared because of their opposition to the brutality of the regime...",<sup>99</sup> but their church would not defend them.

As the year 1977 rolled on, the Mothers' movement continued to grow. Hebe de Bonafini was at first a reluctant participant in the Plaza, realizing that these women were under constant surveillance—being prodded by police, and their police dogs, to "Keep moving, keep moving."<sup>100</sup> At this point, the Mothers of the founding line had already become recalcitrant toward the police, insisting that they would never stop gathering and marching until they knew what had become of their children. Hebe de Bonafini consulted with her husband, Humberto, and the two decided she must work and march with the Mothers. Her quest to discover what happened to her son Jorgé intensified, and then her second son, Raúl, was disappeared as well. The next day, Hebe's daughter-in-law, María Elena (wife of Jorgé), informed her that Raúl and

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Bouvard, 53 (from Marguerite Bouvard's interview with Hebe de Bonafini in August, 1989).

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 53-54.

<sup>100</sup> Madres, *Historia*, 8.

everyone at a union gathering at Berazategui had been arrested and taken away. This occurred in December, 1977, and the impact upon Hebe de Bonafini was transformational. Utterly bereft and without hope of discovering the condition of her two sons, she dedicated her life to working with the Mothers' organization. Hebe began to assume her sons' moral crusading characteristics, taking up their causes and working for political reform. After her daughter-in-law was also disappeared on May 25, 1978, Hebe was even more committed to political reform.<sup>101</sup> The bond between all of the Mothers increased throughout the years of the junta, even as they were forced to mourn the disappearance of some of their leaders.

In December, 1977, Azucena Villaflor de Vincenti, Esther Allestrino de Careaga and Maria Eugenia Ponce de Bianco (three of the founding Mothers) were all disappeared. A few days later, two French nuns, who were also compassionate about the plight of the disappeared, were taken.<sup>102</sup> These French missionaries, Sister Leonie Duquet and Sister Alice Domon, worked among the poorest neighborhoods in Buenos Aires. Concerned over the disappearances of young people, Sister Leonie began to attend meetings of the Mothers of the Plaza. Because of her work on their behalf, she "...was abducted from a church by security forces..."<sup>103</sup> Sister Leonie Duquet and Sister Alice Domon were both "...last seen being taken to the Naval Mechanical School in Buenos Aires, the dictatorship's notorious detention center where thousands were tortured."<sup>104</sup> All of this occurred in December of 1977.

History and DNA have proven what has happened with at least four of these five women. On July 8, 2005, the Inter Press News Service reported that the bodies of Azucena Villaflor de Vincenti, Esther Ballestrino de Careaga and Maria Eugenia Ponce de Bianco had been positively identified by "The Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team."<sup>105</sup> It was confirmed by investigators that these three Mothers, like thousands of other disappeared, "...had been thrown into the sea shortly after the three women were kidnapped by the security forces."<sup>106</sup> In August, 2005, Reuters reported that: "Forensic experts have identified the skeletal remains of one of two French nuns whose disappearances in 1977 came to symbolize the brutality of Argentina's military dictatorship."<sup>107</sup> This was the body of Sister Leonie Duquet, which was found in one of the regime's many unmarked, mass graves. As yet, Sister Alice Domon's remains have not been discovered. However, these hallmark disappearances garnered much publicity and sympathy for the Mothers, while strengthening them to stand up and pursue justice more vehemently.

Following the disappearance of the three leading Mothers of the Founding Line (*Línea Fundadora*), and over the years prior the fall of the junta, Hebe de Bonafini began to play a leading role. As Marguerite Guzman Bouvard describes her:

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<sup>101</sup> Sarah Burns's interview with Hebe de Bonafini, January 2012.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> "Argentina identifies French nun slain in Dirty War," in *Catholic News*, September 2, 2005.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> "ARGENTINA: Remains of Mothers of Plaza de Mayo Identified," in Argentina Rights section of website, *mostly water*: <http://mostlywater.org/node/3058>.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> *Catholic News*, September 2, 2005.

*Hebe's moral strength comes from her refusal to be swayed by the lures of power or to compromise her principles. It also arises from her unique spiritual perspective. Having waged a battle against the hypocrisy and complicity of the church during the Dirty War, she lives the message of all religions, extending her unconditional generosity not only to her work but also to all who seek her help.*<sup>108</sup>

Hebe has never discarded the mantle she assumed in 1978. In her pain and rage, she stated, "As long as I am alive, my sons will also be alive."<sup>109</sup> From that point, Hebe has fearlessly pursued justice for the disappeared, taking her message around the world, also attempting several audiences with the pope. On one such occasion, she and other Mothers managed to be part of a receiving line when the pope passed by. She thrust pictures into Pope John II of Poland's hands, saying "Please help the disappeared!"<sup>110</sup> The pope let these pictures fall to the floor, responding, "There are disappeared in many countries."<sup>111</sup> Because of her tenacious forwardness with leading political figures, Hebe has become a prime target of salacious politicians since the fall of the junta.

Throughout the years of junta rule, the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo were a unified group—incessantly seeking answers and given few, while disseminating information as widely as they could to the world community. The regime's engines of torture were finally brought to a screeching halt in 1983, after an attempt and failure at self-renewal, and justification, via the humiliating Falklands War (in which the Argentine military was soundly defeated by the British in just 73 days). Journalists who had survived and relocated were busy spreading the story of the junta's atrocities. When criticism from around the world focused on the junta's many human rights violations and military failures, they were finally forced to relinquish control. The Mothers of the Plaza hoped for answers.

The next phase of Argentine presidential history was led by Raúl Alfonsín, who served as Argentina's president for six years, starting in 1983. Taking a public stance against the immoral deeds of the military junta, President Alfonsín first set a policy of retribution, bringing the military to trial for their atrocities. Unfortunately, the economy faltered during the years of recovery from the junta, and Alfonsín was under constant scrutiny. Eventually, he caved to military pressure.

During the trial of the junta's ex-commanders in 1985, President Alfonsín allowed his legal advisor, Carlos Nino, to draft two laws which came to be known as "Due Obedience and Punto Final laws."<sup>112</sup> Under these laws, the actions of most of the military would be excused as an act of obedience to their commanding officers. One victim of the disappearances, Victoria Benítez, stated later that the trials were mainly for show, and there was never an intention to

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<sup>108</sup> Bouvard, 108.

<sup>109</sup> Sánchez, *Historias de vida*, 75.

<sup>110</sup> Bouvard, 88.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Feitlowitz, 15.

bring all participants to justice. She stated that victims were frightened to speak about their incarceration and treatment. Furthermore, most Argentines unaffected by the Dirty War did not want to hear about the atrocities.<sup>113</sup> On the other hand, presidential adviser Nino explained these laws in the following manner: “I don’t think that justice need be retributive. I don’t have the Kantian view that a crime unpunished equals an absolute injustice. Symbolic prosecutions have great resonance, particularly in a country that is not essentially violent and needs to heal.”<sup>114</sup> The Mothers got the message: these trials were symbolism, meant to salve the wounds of a bleeding nation, and now Argentina must look to a new future. It was as if the military had been given a sharp slap on the cheek, rather than the thorough purge which was essential.

One of the mothers of the Concordia chapter discovered “...that the head of a regiment who was responsible for the *disappearance* of a conscript had just received a promotion and an award from the government, despite the protests of the various human-rights groups in that city.”<sup>115</sup> When she reported this information at a meeting of the national organization, the Mothers took action. They insisted and were given an appointment with the president. However, when they arrived in great numbers, wearing their signature white shawls, they were informed that Alfonsín was not available. Insisting upon an audience with the president, they sat down in the lobby of the Casa Rosada, intent on camping out overnight if necessary. Supporters brought blankets, chairs and food; and when workers and cleaning crews arrived at the Casa the following morning, the Mothers filled the front entrance. Workers were forced to enter by a back door. Once again, the Mothers proved to be an impregnable force when it came to making their message known. One of the president’s advisers, Dr. Rabossi, met with a spokesperson of the Mothers, Dr. Ravenna; and the dialogue began.

The Mothers were protesting leniency toward the military, and ably characterized the ongoing weakness in Argentina’s governmental institutions. They charged “that the president had the governmental institutions behind him while the military retained the power.”<sup>116</sup> Interviewed by a newspaper at the time, Hebe de Bonafini stated: “What good is an army like ours which turned the country into a concentration camp, robbing, torturing, assassinating, taking money out of the country?...When it was time to really defend the country, it couldn’t do it!”<sup>117</sup> The latter, of course, was caustic commentary about the military’s fiasco in the Falklands. As the Mothers continued to express their fears and concerns over light sentences or excusal under “Due Obedience,” they also experienced harsh criticism by leading newspapers.

Meanwhile, the trials continued, the Mothers attended, and they were disappointed by the verdict. “General Videla was found guilty of 66 counts of homicide, 306 counts of false arrest aggravated by threats and violence, 93 counts of torture, 4 counts of torture followed by death,

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 142.

<sup>114</sup> From Feitlowitz’s interview with Professor Nino on March 11, 1993, at the Yale Law School, “where he was teaching a two-month seminar on human rights law.” (Notes, p. 260).

<sup>115</sup> Bouvard, 157.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 158.

<sup>117</sup> Madres, *Boletín*, no. 15

and 26 counts of robbery. He was sentenced to lifelong imprisonment, perpetual disqualification from holding public office, and loss of military rank.”<sup>118</sup> Admiral Massera also received a life sentence. Brigadier Ramón Agosti, however, charged with fewer crimes, received only a four and a half year sentence. These sentences seemed to please audiences in other nations. To the victims of the Dirty War, this was precious little, especially considering the thousands of complaints which had been filed. The Mothers realized they had a long road ahead of them, and Hebe de Bonafini determined that she would accomplish nothing if she worked in concert with Argentina’s government. She became not only a watchdog of the first order, but a completely fearless radical in search of reform. This is where divisions within the Mothers’ movement first surfaced.

Matilde Mellibovsky describes what she sees as two core reasons for this parting of the ways. Hebe’s group declared that “...there was no difference between the military dictatorship and the government chosen by the people: they were not giving us any answers.”<sup>119</sup> On the other hand, the Founding Mothers believed they were making progress working with the government because of their ability to “...broadcast the subject of human rights to a degree impossible during the dictatorship. Books have been printed, movies have been produced, magazines have been published, student centers have reappeared, some children of the disappeared have been recovered...”<sup>120</sup> The second point on which they disagreed was on the exhumation of the bodies of the disappeared, once the mass graves were identified. The Founding Mothers believed the decision to exhume was very personal, and every family must make this decision independently. Because this work continues through the years, the Founding Mothers act “...as a guarantor for the young anthropologists who devote themselves to this work,” and the Mothers accompany “each family at the moment of the exhumation and recovery of the remains of their loved ones.”<sup>121</sup> On the other hand, Hebe de Bonafini and the Mothers of the Plaza organization reject this idea. In a personal interview in January, 2012, Hebe criticized Mellibovsky, because exhumations and subsequent memorials to their disappeared were paid for by the government. The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo have taken the firm stance that, through their work, they memorialize the lives of their offspring—not their deaths. In spite of these differences, the two groups still march peacefully together every Thursday, around the Plaza de Mayo.

As the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo’s combativeness continued, President Alfonsín became an outspoken critic, calling them Marxists. Interviewed by a German television station in 1985, he complained about the work of the Mothers: “It was bad for democracy to defend those who caused all the bloodshed with conceptions that led to terrorist subversion.”<sup>122</sup> His

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<sup>118</sup> Bouvard, 160.

<sup>119</sup> Mellibovsky, 179.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Madres, *Monthly Newspaper*, September 1985.

implication was that the disappeared victims were at fault for the military takeover. However, the struggle for truth became even more difficult following the Alfonsín presidency.

Carlos Saúl Menem ascended to the presidency May 14, 1989. He was a Perónist who, as Perón, "...used the left to achieve power, only to turn to the right once in office."<sup>123</sup> As a military sympathizer, Menem used the law, "Due Obedience," to pardon the remaining military. He called Hebe de Bonafini a "...national traitor and began proceedings to bring her to court on charges of contempt for authority, a criminal offense in Argentina."<sup>124</sup> By this point in history, Hebe de Bonafini knew no fear. She replied just as boldly, stating, "Our country is different from his. His is the military, money and the United States, power, a Ferrari. Ours is the working men and women who give their lives for it, our children, the Plaza, life, the earth."<sup>125</sup> Hebe's words confirm the title of this report: mothers have always been the leaders in defending Mother Earth's greatest resources.

Hebe and the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo continued to oppose Menem at every turn, and he in kind heaped verbal abuse upon her, criticizing her appearance, as well as her activity.<sup>126</sup> On several occasions, the police physically abused Hebe. She was arrested, took blows to the head, but never did de Bonafini back down. Argentina, its government and military had already taken her precious children; she and over a hundred other mothers have lived the remainder of their days defending their cause. Collectively, the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, the *Línea Fundadora*, and the *Abuelas de la Plaza de Mayo* (Grandmothers of the Plaza) have pursued justice until all of the military leaders involved in the Dirty War were brought to trial and received sentences. They continue their search for the disappeared, and continue seeking justice in Argentine courts today. The following are live (recorded) interviews conducted by Sarah Burns, assisted by Dr. Mirta Mantares, in January, 2012:

*Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo (Monday, January 23, 2012, in the Buenos Aires courthouse):*

*My name is Maria Isabel Chorobik de Mariani, and I am 88 years old. I am still looking for my granddaughter. She would be 35 years old now. They took her when she was 3 months old. Since then I have been looking for her. I have walked every place trying to look for information, every organism to look for news. I would go everywhere, even to Australia, to find news. I never received a proper answer. I was sent to different places, different countries to look for her, but have not found her yet.*

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<sup>123</sup> Bouvard, 50.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 214.

<sup>125</sup> "Madres de Plaza de Mayo," *La Nación* (Buenos Aires), April 10, 1991.

<sup>126</sup> Sarah Burns's Interview, January 2012. Hebe de Bonafini is often affectionately called La Gorda (the fat one). However, in Menem's case, he criticized her for lack of attention to her appearance. Hebe boasts frequently that she is not trying to draw attention to herself through makeup and other forms of vanity. She and the other Mothers are directing attention only to their cause, and the signature head kerchiefs bearing their children's names assists in this purpose.

Why are you here today?

*I initiated this [formal claim, petition] many years ago, when I was the head of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, and also the founder of the association. I initiated that claim with the hope of getting answers about the more than 400 children that are disappeared. It was not easy. We have eleven, twelve, thirteen years already with this claim. We expect that this year we will have results, to get something.*

Are these all grandchildren?

*No. The children they are looking for are those children who were born in the concentration camps. All the really young babies, they were taken with their parent. All of those 400 children include children and grandchildren. This includes all the children who were taken, and those that were born in the concentration camps. The association of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo are different from the abuelas. The abuelas includes only grandchildren, but also we follow individually all of the things that have to do with our children. I look for the cadaver of my son and my daughter-in-law even until today. But grandmothers only look for grandchildren. The association of the Mothers also look for their children. What is important to be clear is that the mothers also look for their sons and daughters, not only their grandchildren. Mothers look for relatives, as an association. Every single member of the foundation, they look for their sons, daughters, as an individual—not as a part of the association. I am looking for my grandchild, Clara Anahi Mariani.*

The dates when you became involved with the mothers?

*I started looking for my granddaughter the day after she disappeared: November 24, 1976. My granddaughter gives me the strength to continue looking, because of the injustice. That gives me the strength. My intention is to go and look for them, work in order to avoid this happening again. Just the knowledge that this injustice took place.*

Do you still walk in the circle every Thursday?

*No, I am not doing that any more. But I work every day looking for my granddaughter. I keep connections with Argentinian abuelas that don't live in Argentina. With other organizations out of the country, no connections. I used to have them, but not now. When I was part of the Abuelas of the Plaza, in 1989 I left the association. After that, I found an association of human rights called Association Anahi.*

***Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo; Interview with Hebe de Bonafini (Monday, January 23, 2012 in the Mothers' of the Plaza office):***

How old were you when this movement began, and what year?

*I was 49 years old.*

The disappeared in your family were?

*That very moment, my first son. In ten months, the second son disappeared. My only brother was disappeared too. My daughter-in-law was taken, one year and a half after my second son was taken. And afterwards, my husband died as well. The whole situation was very sad for my husband. Almost every member of my family died, except my daughter, who was 14 years old at the time.*

For how many of the disappeared have you discovered what happened?

*Mothers, we don't look for cadavers. We don't assume that they are dead, because they weren't found. There are people behind bars, but nobody said they killed anyone. Looking for a cadaver is an individual fight. We are taking everyone's child as our own. "Your child is my child." For all of the mothers.*

By the end of the first year of circling the plaza, how many were participating?

*We were born in April [1977] as an association. Eventually, there were 200 mothers. In December of 1977 three mothers were taken and disappeared: Azucena was one. Three mothers were taken, and also two French nuns. The next march around the plaza, most of the mothers were very afraid to participate. There was a navy captain, Alfredo Astiz, he was there incognito. Because of him, the mothers were under scrutiny, and were afraid to march. Before, our children disappeared, and now we have mothers disappearing.*

How many of the mothers have accounted for their disappeared, where they were taken, if they were dead?

*Almost all of us, we have had some news. People that were coming from concentration camps, they had some news; and we gathered the information. Those people were coming with a piece of paper saying, "I was with this person in the concentration camp." But the problem is that they weren't using their names. They were using "apodos," or nicknames [in English].*

Scilingo and his testimony—what do you know about him?

*One of them [military] that was doing that bad thing, told us that our sons were being thrown out of the airplane. That person came to us trying to sell the information. Who is going to want to buy that kind of information? We started investigating, and then Scilingo came and confirmed that this was happening. That awful thing was happening. Then he appeared in Spain to hear the statements, the declarations, and we went to hear him. But many people were responsible for what was happening, because priests were in the airplanes saying, "This is a good thing that you are doing. It is patriotic. Don't worry."*

How many grandchildren and children have been accounted for? Do we know?

*One hundred eight [108] grandchildren were found.*

How many grandmothers still need to find their grandchildren?

*Well, that is the work for abuelas. Our work is more political. We are making a political and social movement and using all of the media—radios and televisions. We are starting to do the work that our sons were doing.*

Humanitarian?

*Yes, humanitarian.*

Were you working with mothers in other countries?

*Well, we had two meetings in Europe in 1984. We met with Palestinian mothers; we met with Israeli mothers; we met with mothers that are opposing the mafia in Italy; and we met with mothers opposing drugs in Spain. The first meeting was in Paris in 1984. President Mitterand. There, mothers from Brazil were there in Paris; also mothers from Guatemala. Two years ago, we had another meeting at the end of 2009. It was in Italy. The mothers from Saharai and Morocco attended this meeting; they were not at the first meeting [in Paris in 1984]. In 1984, the Palestinians and Israelis did not want to meet together. We were working three days to convince the mothers of different ideologies that they were working for the same cause. In 2009 in Italy, they came from many places, including Yugoslavia. There, mothers of many nations wanted to work together. Eighteen countries were represented there in 2009. We wanted to have the mothers there in those meetings. I understood that Kurdish mothers and [unclear], they were supported by political parties in their country. We didn't want that. We wanted to have those mothers, even if they don't know how to speak, tell us what happened to them. The women coming from Turkey, their sons are alive, behind bars. Their problem is not the same as ours. There were strong discussions because the representatives of political parties came and tried to talk to them. We had translators from every country, to communicate, to make sure everyone understood each other. Because they had that meeting in the Italian Parliament. They provided the translators. We wanted to hear only the mothers. In 2009, Mexico came, and the lady representing Mexico was killed. The meeting happened; and when she went back to Mexico, three months later, she was killed.*

What country has been the most difficult to deal with, in terms of the mothers?

*No. What we try to do is to get the mothers involved, instead of the political party. The political parties divide the mothers. What happened is that when the mothers go back to their country, sometimes they are arrested, imprisoned; and then they don't want to participate any more. That's the reason why some people from the political parties attend, because they are accustomed with dealing with these types of problems. We just want to have the mothers there. What we explained to the mothers is that if we make a mistake, it is our problem—nobody else's. We say, "Your children are my children. There are no political parties here." It doesn't matter if they are Perónist or Marxist, because here is an association of mothers. When the party gets involved, I immediately say no, stop. That is not the way. Don't socialize the maternity. This is not a crime against humanity; it is a genocide.*

The difficulty you had in 1980 with the U.N. and the U.S. cutting support from the mothers, what was the stance of President Reagan and Jean Kirkpatrick?

*In 1980 the Dutch women had formed a group with the Mothers of the Plaza. Those women sent us money to buy a house, because we didn't have the money. That association of mothers in Holland, the Prime Minister's wife was involved. In three years, we didn't have a place to meet. This woman wanted to go to Argentina because she sympathized with the women. We have twenty [20] solidarity groups that we are associated with. The prime minister's wife had a problem because she was bringing money. There was some confusion about where the money came from, and she was almost arrested. However, she was a fighter, wanting to support the cause. That year, the Mothers of the Plaza were nominated for the Nobel Prize for Peace; instead, another Argentinian, Adolfo Perez Esquivel, won the prize. The country of Norway gave the mothers an alternative prize to the Nobel Prize; the same amount of money to the mothers.*

President Carter was giving monetary assistance to overthrow the junta; after Reagan was elected, that money went away. What do you know about that issue?

*The United States was an accomplice with the military government in Argentina. They sent money to the military for armaments. Reagan is the guy who organized the Condor operation.*

How cooperative are the previous and current presidents of Argentina with your work?

*Nestor and Christina Fernandez-Kirchner both condemned the military.*

Tell me anything that is important for me to take away from this interview--past or present.

*Normally, our women who are involved in forming groups like ours, every time we go out and visit different countries, we see that normally it is women who form groups like ours. In Italy, the mothers in Italy are fighting against the Mafia women. In Palestine, the Mujeres de Negro. The women are the ones who start to change things. Now young people are involved and working. We work with many young people. What's happened is that we are now very old. I am now 83. The oldest member of the group is now 97, and every day she comes to work here. Her name is Juana de Pargament. Right now she is on vacation.*

How many of the original mothers are still alive and working?

*In all the country, there are about 150. In Buenos Aires, there are thirty, ready to go everywhere, never sleep.*

Can you supply me with the names of the surviving original mothers?

*Well, we all belong to the foundational group. [Mirta will provide those names to me].*

Hebe motions toward the book I brought to the interview. I ask "Do you know Matilde?"

*Yes, but I don't like what she did. She accepted money from the government. The government paid \$270,000 to mothers who would accept that. Matilde did not accept the idea that "your child is my child." The mothers who accepted the*

*money left the association because they accepted that their children were dead. We would not accept that.*

***La Lindea Fundadora (Thursday, January 26, 2012, in a restaurant in Buenos Aires, following the March on the Plaza):***

What is your name?

*Nora Morales de Cortiñas.*

Tell me about your work with the Mothers. How are you able to continue this work after so many years?

*This is a process of adaptation, to fight. It is getting together to become stronger. It is for mothers to get an equilibrium, or a balance.*

*The Founding Mothers are a separate organization from Hebe's association.*

*I have one son who disappeared. The name is Carlos Gustavo. April 15, 1977 he was disappeared. That was 35 years ago. The mothers were formed then, and I participated in that foundation. The mothers are divided in two associations; ours is not with Hebe de Bonafini. I never knew anything about my son. The fact that they founded the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo helped us to become stronger, and to continue to look for the truth and justice. My son, as many others that disappeared then, were political activists. He disappeared because of his ideology and his activism, as the other 30,000 people that disappeared. Even the young people who didn't actively participate in political reform, they were persecuted because of their ideologies. Clearly, we mothers were persecuted and endangered because we were looking for our children. At the beginning, some mothers disappeared, and mothers that had sons behind bars in prison, some of them were disappeared. Those mothers that disappeared never ever again appeared. Some others were thrown into the ocean, and their bodies were found. I was many times arrested because of my activities. I was at the police station and threatened many times. We had to confront the military police, part of the population, citizens. Why? That part of the population that has fascist beliefs. We were attacked because of what we were trying to discover. We survived, and now through these years we have been recognized. And now we are respected. And now many people that, in the past, criticized us, now accept us. And now, in*

*this moment, we are very respected. And now, really, we feel that there are places where we feel that respect. Well, now all the questions are responded.*

Dr. Mirta Mántaras asks her about their work with students in the school system.

*Yes, well, we go to talk with the students, to tell them our stories, to transmit the stories of our daughters and sons. And telling that they were activists, political activists, and that we are proud of them. We are fighting for a cause that is social justice. It was a fight for everyone to have the same rights, and that was a base fight where we want everyone to be respected—students, workers, all people. Also, we are defending other causes that have to do with human rights. For example, to have the right to have an education, health, those rights. To have the right to have a home, a house, also working for indigenous peoples, to get back the lands that were taken. In any area where we find injustice. I am a member of the Linea Fundadora de Plaza de Mayo. I am 82 years old, and I feel that every day I have more strength to go out and defend our sons and daughters. And in addition, I am a feminist. I am happy that the young people can learn through us. I like that the young people can learn that there is another story, different from the other people, the story from the military. Our work goes on. We know many people, and we learned to share and learned to receive all the affection that is given to us every day. I'm happy that we are receiving respect; talking about political parties sometimes brings differences. We want the people to discuss, because we don't need to think in the same way, and what everyone thinks must be respected as well.*

Mirta Mántaras tells Mrs. Cortiñas, “The lady admires you” (referring to Sarah Burns, who is conducting the oral interview).

*Well, try to get this translated.*

Mirta explains the purpose for my interview and research—women of the Himalays, Kenya, Chiapas, and the Mothers—post colonial, post- revolutionary, post junta, the mothers continue their work.

*Response: We put our ovaries! [Meaning we use our feminism to work for us]. My son is Carlos Gustavo Cortiñas. He was 24 years old when he was disappeared.*

The work of all of these Mothers has consumed their lives since their offspring and relatives were disappeared. From their middle age years to their old age years, they have been constant, tireless, and fearless in their attacks upon injustice and inequality within Argentine society. Still criticized by the wealthy Argentines today because of their work on behalf of the poor, they are stalwarts in pursuit of political reform and transparency regarding the victims of the Dirty War. Through stubborn persistence, the Mothers forced the trials of all military serving in the Dirty War. They have continued working for and bringing about political reform. Hebe de Bonafini believes the Mothers are most effective as they work separately from the government—citizens opposing corruption within the government. Mothers of the founding line choose to work within the system. However, both groups continue to forge change and educate today's youth about this sad period in the history of Argentina. More than any other women's organization of the 20<sup>th</sup>/21<sup>st</sup> centuries, the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo have worked in association with mothers' groups throughout Latin America, Europe, Northern Africa and the Middle East, attempting to impart their methodology. As Hebe states to anyone who will listen, when the governments interfere in the process, privacy disappears, censorship occurs, and much of her advice is lost in translation.

Collectively, the women of the Indian Himalayas, Kenya, the Chiapas region of Mexico, and the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo have proven that when the oppressor is overthrown, the women's work begins. The lingering effects of colonialism, revolution and military control leave societies entrenched in harsh patriarchy. Women of the Indian Himalayas bravely wrapped themselves around trees, threatened by the buzz of logging saws, for decades. They did so in order to protect not only a rich and rare ecosystem, but a way of life for the peasants of Garhwal and the Uttarkhand. Through the decades, they became political and brought about governmental and environmental reforms. Today they labor to create collectives, to protect the land and inheritance rights of all single women (historically, an overlooked and disrespected group). They are females protecting the rights of all females. The women of Kenya have worked since the end of British colonialism to provide their sisters with land and agrarian rights, methods, and entrepreneurial skills—not merely to provide food for their families, but to guide them toward profitable careers. They are entering politics and working for public education for all peoples of Kenya, especially females of the lower classes. They labor constantly to end female genital mutilation (FGM) and give women a choice in marriage. Women of the Chiapas region of Mexico have organized in order to protect one another against physical abuse and rape through the COLEM organization. They have marched and vocalized their complaints against a government which, through NAFTA and GATT, sold their lands and ruined their local markets and culture. As Zapatistas, they don their black masks and work collectively to improve the lot

of indigenous women of the Chiapas Highlands, protect the culture of the Highland *campesinas*, and provide education for their children. The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo have relinquished any personal goals they may have set for themselves before the disappearances, dedicating their every waking hour to exposing political and military corruption within their country. As they tie their white kerchiefs upon their aging heads and march in the Plaza de Mayo every Thursday, they continue to send their message to the Casa Rosada which overshadows them: *We are here, we are watching, and our children live through us.*

As Claris Gatwiri Kariuki of Kenya states, “When a woman is empowered, the whole nation is empowered.”<sup>127</sup> The groups presented in this paper have dedicated their lives to furthering women’s rights, survival of their offspring, preservation of their various cultures, and of the earth upon which we must all survive. Although scores of politicians, corporations, and the military have vilified each group, their work has endured in spite of physical abuse and opposition. Leaving indelible footprints across the landscape of the world, this collective army of women has nonviolently embraced life. If their examples were modeled throughout the world, Mother Earth might survive, and thrive.

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<sup>127</sup> Kariuki, p. 7.

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