University of Chicago

Department of Sociology

Department of Global Studies

LA MAREA VERDE: THE PERSONAL SIGNIFICANCE OF PRO-CHOICE PROTEST PARTICIPATION FOR YOUNG WOMEN IN BUENOS AIRES, ARGENTINA

by

Claire Eliza Keenan-Kurgan

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Preceptor: Austin Kozlowski

Faculty Advisor: Elisabeth Clemens

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Abstract

In December 2020, abortion was legalized in Argentina. The years prior were marked by massive protests of hundreds of thousands of women in the streets of the nation's capital city of Buenos Aires, demanding universal access to free, legal, and safe abortion. Building on existing theories of mechanisms and impacts of mobilization (*McAdam 1988; Jasper 1997; Tufecki 2012), my research looks at the reasons young women attended protests and the characteristics of individual protest experiences, in order to investigate the personal significance of pro-choice activism for young women in Buenos Aires. I ask, what kinds of political consciousness and understandings of self, specifically in terms of gender, emerged through protest participation? Interviews with nine young women in Buenos Aires who were in high school or the first few years of university at the time of these protests reveal the following overall finding: protest spaces and protest participation provided young women with an opportunity to re-imagine their gender identity through political action and to develop new understandings of gender roles in Argentina. Participants describe feeling more empowered, being better equipped with tools to identify patriarchal structures in their daily lives, and feeling more motivated to continue with feminist activism even after abortion was legalized. Understanding the personal value individuals take away from protest participation may contribute to theories of why people choose to join in and how protest movements, for reproductive rights or otherwise, can best build momentum.*

Table of Contents

¡Abajo el patriarcado, que va a caer, que va a caer!
¡Arriba el feminismo, que va a vencer, que va a vencer![1]

Introduction

For years, abortion rights were an untouchable political topic in Argentina, a majority Catholic country with a long history of anti-abortion policy. In 2020, after decades of dedicated political organizing, what was once thought to be impossible happened: abortion was legalized in Argentina, making it the third country in Latin America after Cuba and Uruguay to guarantee access to free, safe, legal abortions to all residents. Although a variety of political factors influenced this decision, one key factor was the frequency and scale of public protests in the country's capital city of Buenos Aires. The largest of the protests were attended by hundreds of thousands of participants. Beyond being a watershed moment in Argentine politics, these protests were also formative experiences for the thousands of young women who participated in them regularly for almost three years. This project seeks to better understand the personal impact of this very recent political movement on young women as they came of age amidst large-scale social changes, using the case study of the campaign for universal access to abortion in Argentina to draw larger conclusions about social mobilization and gender.

Referred to as *la Marea Verde,* meaning the Green Tide, a name inspired by the distinctive green bandanas that pro-choice protesters waved, this unique protest movement composed overwhelmingly of young women provides an opportunity to examine the formation of political consciousness among young women in a short span of years. The movement left a lasting impact on Argentine society, especially in Buenos Aires, which tends to be the site of most political controversy and protest. My research has investigated the personal significance of pro-choice activism on young women in the capital city, finding that protest spaces and protest

[1] A popular chant at pro-choice protests in Buenos Aires, roughly translated as, Down with the patriarchy, it will fall! Up with feminism, it will prevail!

participation provided them with an opportunity to re-imagine their gender identity through political action, developing new understandings of gender roles in Argentina. I conducted semi-structured interviews with young women in Buenos Aires who attended pro-choice protests regularly in the years before abortion was legalized. The experiences of my participants at protests were overwhelmingly positive, an unsurprising finding but not necessarily a given one – group action for reproductive rights were characterized by feelings of empowerment and celebration despite possible reminders of powerlessness and oppression.

My interviews reveal that participants' involvement with pro-choice activism reshaped their ways of relating to and understanding gender. My participants describe feeling more empowered as women, being better equipped with tools to identify patriarchal structures in their daily lives, and feeling more motivated to continue with feminist activism even after abortion was legalized. I focus on the protests themselves as a means of transformation, as they provided an opportunity for young women to create a non-patriarchal environment, reshape gender roles, and experience successful political change led by women activists. This research illuminates how large scale societal changes coincide with personal transformations among hundreds of thousands of people. However, it holds larger implications than just that: understanding the personal benefits young women take away joining a protest can shed new light on the processes that drive protest participation and build the momentum of social movements.

Theoretical Framework

Political Impact of Protest Movements

Most existing literature on social movements focuses on the political impacts that they can have. The stated purpose of most protest movements is to change a specific law or political

structure; in this case, to legalize abortion nationally in Argentina. Shows of widespread support for a cause, in addition to the spatial and temporal disruptions that large protests create, can convince legislatures of public support or demand for a certain policy. Protests can act as useful cues for politicians about what the public wants, with the size of a protest and the unity of its message being the most persuasive protest factors in convincing elected officials to take action (Wouters et. al 2017). However, the reality of an individual's motivations to join a movement can be far more nuanced than just their support for a given political project and their desire to convince elected officials of that political project, and their involvement in a movement can carry meanings more complex than their political convictions.

Considering the recent history of military dictatorship and political oppression, citizens in Argentina have an increased pride in their ability to voice dissenting political opinions. In recent years, protests have been incredibly common in Argentina, and Argentineans are well accustomed to taking to the streets to effect democratic change. Moseley (2018) puts this well in his comprehensive study of the rise of political protest in Latin America, “in Argentina, protest is simply a way of life” (Moseley 2018, 2). In Argentina, as in many Latin American countries that have experienced rapid democratization since the 1980s, public interest in democratic participation has outpaced the “consolidation of high-quality formal institutions,” meaning that there is a “gap between citizens’ demands for representation and its supply;” mass protests are one way for gaps in opportunities for democratic participation to be filled when formal institutions lack structure or reach (Moseley 2018, 72). In the context of feminist protests, Sutton (2020) studies the ways in which feminist protest movements in Argentina are valuable sites of inter-generational political collaboration and exchange between generations who grew up in times of dictatorship and the current generation raised in a democratic society. I mention this

context because the recognition of the existing enthusiasm for protest and the proven political value of protest is a useful backdrop to studying protests' emotional affective effects and the general takeaways individuals have from participating in collective political action. Looking exclusively at the political effects of a protest movement – like the passage of legislation – can leave out some of the movement's societal accomplishments.

Motivating Factors to Join a Social Movement

To best understand how and why individuals value protest participation, it is important to examine existing theories on why they join and how social movements like the pro-choice movement in Argentina are understood to recruit participants. Public perception of others' opinions is an established influencing factor on individual decisions to express an opinion or not. The "threshold model" proposes that if a high enough number of people, distributed evenly through a community, participate in a collective action, a majority of the others will follow suit (Granovetter 1973). However, barometers of social movement support are not always easy to measure. Kuran (1991) studied revolutions in Eastern Europe to show that movements that are less predictable and catch the public by surprise can still garner widespread support, showing that Grannovetter's threshold can be passed swiftly with enough widespread communication. Furthermore, "spiral of silence" theory explains that an individual's perception of the distribution of public opinion can also influence their decision to withhold their true beliefs in order to act in accordance with their perceived sense of the majority opinion (Neumann 1980). Thus, the influence of perceived public opinion on social phenomena like the growth of social movement is already well established; my study presents an example of distinctive performances of public opinion and asks further questions about what happens *after* activation thresholds are crossed.

In terms of social movements specifically, there are specific tools and mechanisms that can contribute to their growth and popularity. Tilly (1994) offers a four-part scorecard through which people evaluate social movements in their communities: worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment – otherwise known as "WUNC" – arguing that any movement that displays those four qualities will be more likely to recruit participants. Tufecki (2012) demonstrates that social media amplifies the effects of this process, creating new platforms for individuals to generate perceptions of a social movement within their community, and new ways to make decisions about protest participation. Using the case study of the Arab Spring protests in Egypt's Tahrir Square, she shows that social media use increases the chance that an individual attends a protest, (Tufecki et. al 2012). Recently, researchers have put the WUNC framework to the test quantitatively through surveys, demonstrating that contemporary social movements are in fact perceived through these four factors, and that when social movements signal single-issue focuses and large, heterogeneous demographic populations they elicit higher intentions to mobilize (Bailey et. al, 2023). Understanding what factors are important to individuals deciding whether or not to join a movement is a helpful framework for my questions about the takeaways people have from participating – the ways that individuals value movements before and after joining are highly interconnected.

Other scholars argue that the emotional aspects of protest participation are more important to convincing people to join a movement and stay. Jasper (1997) argues that activists' emotional investment in a cause dictates their continued involvement, stating that at some point, "political activity often becomes a central component of many people's identity and way of life, so that they barely need to be 'mobilized,' at least in any active, meaningful sense of the word" (Jasper 1997, 82). He divides the relevant emotional responses to protests as either shared or

reciprocal, meaning emotions that protesters experience together or the emotions they feel towards each other (Jasper 1998). His later research affirms that emotional appeals, regardless of whether they are positive or negative emotions, always help protest mobilization and goals (Jasper 2011). Polletta (2006) has studied the importance of storytelling as an effective protest strategy, arguing that a good narrative can compel people to join a movement and help create shared group understanding even if the moral message of the given story is ambiguous, proving again the emotional intensity of protest involvement. Ultimately, both rely heavily on Durkheim's theory of collective effervescence to in part explain the appeal of large, dense concentrations of people in emotionally charged environments (Durkheim 1912). These findings are key to my research in that they show how intense the emotional responses to social movements can be for their participants. These theories on emotion and protest are important to understanding the impact of protest activity – the emotional motivations and emotional takeaways from protests can exist in responsive cycles as strong emotions after a protest convince a participant to return to the next protest for that same cause. Mobilization is a continual process over time until the movement succeeds in its efforts, therefore the takeaways, emotional or otherwise, from each protest are very important to a protest movement's continued popularity and success.

Studies on the Personal Impact of Protest Participation

Although the motivating factors behind protest participation are well-studied and closely related to the personal impacts that protests can have, there are fewer scholars who have explicitly and purposefully studied the life impacts of protest movements upon their participants. McAdam (1988), in his research on participants in the Freedom Summer movement of the 1960s,

shows how college-aged individuals who become very involved in a political protest movement can start to re-organize most aspects of their lives around their politics, including their friendships, romantic relationships, and career choices. He studies students, who according to him and many other scholars of social movements are more likely to involve themselves in protest movements because they are free of many of the lifestyle constraints (like 9-to-5 jobs, or caretaking young children) that others may have, and shows how they influenced and inspired each other to sign up for the Freedom Summer. McAdam finds that students who participated in Freedom Summer were much more likely to pursue jobs with social or political value than students who were accepted but did not participate, and they were much more likely to say that their experience with activism influenced their career choices (McAdam 1988). Compared to students who were rejected or did not show up to the Freedom Summer campaign, McAdam finds that for participants, "no aspect of their lives was exempt from political examination. Politics or the movement loomed as the central organizing principle of their lives. The no-shows, on the other hand, had experienced no such dramatic political radicalization" (McAdam 1988, 197). McAdam argues that participants were changed primarily through the sustained emotional impact of their experience, and because of the social relationships they forged in challenging environments (McAdam 1988). Thus the Freedom Summer research shows how political consciousness and lifelong political commitments can be created through intense activist experiences.

The activist experiences in question do not have to necessarily be intense in order to shape life course outcomes. Sherkat and Blocker (1997), studying a similar population of student activists of the 1960 as McAdam, but surveying more "run-of-the-mill" protesters as opposed to participants in a program as intense as the Freedom Summer, asked if movement participation

affected (1) politics, (2) status attainment, (3) religion, and (4) family. They show that activist participants eventually achieved higher levels of education, identified as more politically liberal, were less tied to religion, married later, and were less likely to have children. Other research by Sherkat and Ellison (1997) shows that movement participation can alter cognitive structures that compose cultural worldviews, providing cognitive resources for other decisions and situations outside of participating in the protest or otherwise advocating for its stated cause. This research suggests that activism can change participant's outlook on their lives, changing their understanding of self and the ways they respond to problems.

People may also be affected simply through their immersion in the ecosystem of activism. Tufecki (2017) argues that protest movements can create a "movement culture" that becomes an accomplishment in and of itself, whether or not the movement succeeds in achieving its political aims. Individuals can gain immense value from the culture of a movement just by participating or being in a protest space. Jasper reaches similar conclusions about this phenomenon, finding that "much of what protestors do can be understood as experiments aimed at working out new ways of living and feeling… from a cultural perspective, these efforts may have important results, opening up our imaginations of what the future could hold" (Jasper 1997, 65) and that "protestors can care about reinforcing their subculture and networks as much as about their publicly stated, instrumental goals" (Jasper 1997, 209). However, he is less focused on how these protest-driven subcultures make their way into the mainstream, and he does not examine cases like the pro-choice movement in Argentina, where what was once a niche movement succeeds in changing national policy or creating large-scale cultural shifts. Additionally, this literature does not directly address movement culture or activist subcultures that challenge mainstream societal beliefs about gender and gender roles.

Construction and Development of Gender Identity and Politics

Sociologists have long considered many aspects of individual identity as highly performative and affected by our perceptions of others around us. Erving Goffman (1956) famously argued that daily face-to-face interactions are akin to theatrical performances on a stage, where we create and re-create our identities constantly in every interaction we have with others. West and Zimmerman focused on the implications of this for gender dynamics, arguing that gender is a routine of everyday interaction that changes over time (1987). Social processes can change the meanings associated with different genders, and these scholars among others argue that this happens through the evolving ways that individuals express themselves and their gender identity, and in turn the ways we interpret each other's signaling of gender identity and sexuality. Pro-choice protests in Argentina were filled with creative performances of femininity, and interpreting these actions through this lens will help shed light on how those performances contributed to the project of re-defining what it means to be a woman.

Central doctrines of feminist scholarship are that womanhood is learned and developed over the course of one's life, and that gender in and of itself is a performative process with constantly evolving forms of signaling (DeBeauvoir 1949; Butler 1990). This can have political implications, as Millett (1970) articulates, since political inequalities are created and sustained through daily reinforcement of gender hierarchy. Third-wave feminist theory of the 1990s focuses on sexual freedom and empowerment, and increased reproductive rights for women around the globe, and taking action instead of analyzing and theorizing women's situations (Snyder 2008). Most social movements are gendered in some way, even those that are not explicitly dealing with gender issues (Einwohner et. al 2000), and gender inequality can have a strong impact on social movement dynamics (Yulia 2010). Although gender has an established

place in social movement literature, the question of how specific, goal-oriented social movements can shape individual gender performances and meanings is under-examined.

In my research, I consider the space of the pro-choice protests in Argentina as arenas where notions of gender and gender roles in Argentinean society were reworked and re-articulated by young women in real time. There is little research on the specific impact of protest participation on young women or gender minorities specifically, nor is there much research on how activism impacts gendered political identity development while it is taking place. Unlike McAdam, I am not interviewing participants decades after the fact, so I do not examine their life course outcomes. However, I have access to a different kind of impact, because I interview participants at a stage of life where they are still developing their own understandings of their role in society, and they have very recent memories of how their protest experiences influenced their personal identity development. Interviewing protest participants shortly after the event may lead to better and more detailed recall of how their lives have changed before and after this movement.

Considering all this, my research focuses on how the Argentine pro-choice protest movement affected my respondents' notions of gender, their understanding of their role as participants in political processes, and how those two aspects of their lives intersect.

Data and Methods

I conducted nine interviews with young women in Buenos Aires, Argentina, all of whom were in high school or in the first few years of university at the time of large-scale feminist protests from 2018-2020, using a snowball sampling strategy to recruit participants. They are referred to using pseudonyms in my results. I started with a soccer teammate I met while living

in Argentina in 2019, and with whom I have remained in touch over the years. I reached out to contacts she and her friends provided to me via Whatsapp, introducing myself and the project and answering any questions before setting up each interview. All interviewees knew at least one other participant in the project and many knew multiple others. Six participants attended the same high school, *El Colegio Nacional de Buenos Aires*, a large, elite public school in the center of downtown Buenos Aires.[2] The three other participants attended Catholic high schools or were already in university at the time of the protests. The youngest participant was 19 and the oldest was 28, and all other participants were 22 or 23. I sampled both young women and gender-nonconforming young people because I focus on how political activity affects those who are directly affected by gender inequality in Argentinean society and have lived experiences of social and political subordination based on gender. However, all participants who were ultimately interviewed self-identify as women.

I conducted five interviews in Spanish and four in English – I reached out initially in Spanish to each participant and then asked them about their language proficiency and preferences before we met. For the interviews conducted in Spanish, I have translated responses myself and confirmed anything I was unsure of with each participant. Each interview lasted around an hour, and although I prepared a set of questions each time, interviews were semi-structured and many were heavily dependent on what my participants were most enthusiastic about discussing. I asked questions about specific memories from protest participation, general reflections on feminist activism, and how their experiences with this

[2] The *Colegio Nacional De Buenos Aires* is considered by most to be the most prestigious high school in Argentina, and is connected to the *Universidad de Buenos Aires*. Since the years of democratic transition in the 1980s, *el Nacional's* student union has been highly politically active and students at the school have been involved in social and political movements for decades before this one.

movement were related to familial and social relationships or other aspects of their lives, at the time of our interviews and in their past experiences.

There were various limitations to my research. Primarily, despite my proficiency in Spanish and some participants' proficiency in English, there were inevitable challenges of translatability. In any given interview, either I or the participant was not speaking their native language, except in a few cases where participants switched back and forth between Spanish and English, limiting some of their or my ability to express thoughts with full nuance. Additionally, though I have done my best in my translations and confirmed any uncertainties with the participants themselves, I have had to make occasional inferences or subjective choices in order to express my participant's replies in a translated form. Conducting interviews virtually over Zoom or Whatsapp naturally means that there is less direct personal engagement than if I had been able to conduct interviews in-person in Argentina. Lastly, because I utilized a snowball sampling method, my research represents a specific set of experiences among a socially interconnected group within a city of immense diversity.

Although this sample will only represent a portion of the experiences of young people in Buenos Aires, it is well-suited to answer questions about how political activity affects young people. *El Nacional*, the high school that many of my participants attended, has a very active student government with a history of involvement in national politics and social movements, including during the abortion rights protest, meaning these students are part of a particularly politically active group and are a useful sample when studying political activity among young people. Two participants who did not attend *El Nacional* were involved in feminist political organizations unrelated to their high schools (as were many of the students at *El Nacional*), meaning they were even more intensely involved in this political movement.

To analyze my data, I transcribed each interview and coded interviews based on common themes and responses to similar questions. Major themes that emerged as the effects of this social movement included changing dynamics among friend groups, increased awareness of gender discrimination in daily life, renewed appreciation for building community among women and gender minorities, and personal awareness of participants' role in the history of social change in Argentina. I coded interviews based on these topics and a few others, examining similarities and differences in how respondents discussed these themes and their related personal experiences. In my discussion of this research, I make claims about gendered experiences of politics, sexuality, and history based on the stories of the girls I interviewed. My analysis focuses on the way that these young women envisioned their activism and how their understanding of gender in Argentinean society changed as they went to marches. It is very rare to see such a successful social movement composed primarily of young women, and I believe that this case presents us with a unique opportunity to study both the effects of protest participation on young women and the impact that young women can have on political movements. I hoped to make the interviews a space for reflection about my participants' experiences, since I was asking about events that took place only a few years ago. Many interviewees were eager to reopen the kinds of conversations about feminism, patriarchy, and women's role in political change that had slowed down after the legalization of abortion in 2020.

Background on the Pro-Choice Movement in Argentina

The timeline of how abortion was legalized is important to understanding many of the anecdotes my participants share, so here I will briefly summarize some of the events that they reference. The abortion rights movement in Argentina grew slowly for decades, but reached a

watershed year in 2018. The protests that erupted in 2018 in Buenos Aires continued regularly for the next two years, until the law passed in the last few days of 2020, at a relatively unlikely time amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. Most scholarship on abortion legalization suggest that public discussions about abortion happen when countries become more secular, when there are major shifts in public opinion, or when left-leaning majorities take power in the executive and legislative branches – none of which were decidedly true in Argentina in 2018 or the years leading up to it (Daby et. al, 2022). So why did the movement pick up such speed in 2018? What made the debate so intense in that year?

The action began when Mauricio Macri of Argentina's center-right party surprised the public with an announcement that he supported a "responsible and mature debate" in Congress regarding the legalization of abortion. After that announcement, a bill that the National Campaign for Legal, Safe, and Free Abortion – an organization founded in 2005 with the singular goal of legalizing abortion – had proposed to Congress regularly since 2008 was finally accepted onto the legislative agenda. However, this decision to open the debate in Congress had an important catalyst: another large-scale feminist social movement against gender-based violence. A few years earlier, in 2015, other massive protests broke out against femicides in Argentina after several high-profile murders of young girls, comprising a movement called *Ni Una Menos* (which can be roughly translated as *not one girl less*). The "green wave" for abortion rights grew from the success and widespread support for *Ni Una Menos*; the organizational framework necessary for feminist political activism was already established and organizers were able to expand the movement's social justice frame to include abortion rights (Daby et. al. 2022). Thus the abortion debate in Argentina was a consequence of recent feminist mobilization more than anything else (Daby et. al 2022, 361). The National Campaign's motto was, *sexual*

education to be able to choose, contraceptives to avoid abortions, and legal abortions to save lives,[3] encompassing more in their central vision than just abortion access. Activists and organizers framed abortion in an "ambitious and idealistic" manner, painting abortion rights as a way to expand democracy, citizenship, human rights, and individual autonomy, appeals that resonated strongly with many Argentines (Encarnación 2022). Pro-choice activism was fashionable and exciting, and created not only political rifts but also cultural ones.

The largest protests each year happened at a few key points: the first being March 8th, international women's day, and the second being the dates of various rounds of congressional voting. On the days of these votes, there were both pro-choice and pro-life protesters in the crowd. Although these events garnered the largest crowds, there were other forms of protests and organizing constantly, notably the *Martes Verdes* [Green Tuesday] events, where congressional representatives would meet publicly with activists or community members and discuss the abortion law in front of a crowd. The biggest protests were in 2018, when the law was debated in Congress for the first time. In August of 2018 the law passed the Chamber of Deputies (the lower house) but failed in the Senate (the upper house). Protests continued to take place every few months through 2019, albeit with somewhat smaller numbers, but the law was not debated again because of important national elections. After the results of the 2019 election put many pro-choice candidates in office, the law was debated again in 2020 with a much better chance of passing. Indeed, on December 30, 2020, the law passed both houses of Congress and was eventually signed into law. The pandemic slightly lessened the crowds on the day of the 2020 vote, although thousands of young women still took to the streets on the day the law was passed.

[3] Educación sexual para decidir, anticonceptivos para no abortar, aborto legal para no morir.

Results

My project asks the following question: what kind of political consciousness and new understandings of self, especially in terms of gender, emerged through collective political action? Participants told me about all kinds of experiences they had at protests and afterwards. Some of the themes that appeared include a new understanding of gender empowerment, recognition of the value of coming together as women in support of a given cause, empathy for women's struggles outside of their own, and an understanding of how patriarchal structures affect individual identity and life course outcomes. The type of feminism that developed for many of these girls was an inclusive and positive one: their activism sought less restriction, freer definitions of what "woman" can mean, and a form of feminism that included nonbinary people or those with gender-nonconforming identities. They were able to imagine a new world and new politics that could better support them and lead them to the kind of freedom they wanted to have. Instead of trying to assimilate into the existing male-dominated political structures, they found value in women's mobilization and thus were able to see what kind of political change women could accomplish on their own.

El Pañuelo Verde: Protest Woven into the Social Fabric

In the months I spent in Buenos Aires in 2019, signs of the pro-choice movement were everywhere. I saw graffiti with pro-choice slogans in every neighborhood, boutiques with windows filled exclusively with bright green clothing, and even exhibits at major art institutions with inscriptions stating their support for legalizing abortion. Almost every young person I came across was a frequent attendee of pro-choice marches. As I was told by Martina, a current university student who had just started her degree in 2019, "everyone was there, almost everyone

of our age. It was a huge, huge movement." Pro-choice activism was remarkably culturally influential in Buenos Aires, and the protests and daily life were deeply intertwined.

The use of *pañuelos verdes,* green bandanas, is an apt example of how the pro-choice movement transitioned seamlessly back and forth between the protests outside Congress and the sidewalks of the city on any given day. In any photo or video of pro-choice marches in any city in Argentina, the iconic green bandanas invented and distributed by the National Campaign swing from the hands of almost everyone in the crowd. The bandanas' symbolic value was twofold. First, they were a way for young women to wear their political affiliation during this years-long debate on their sleeve, so to speak, facilitating the social dynamics of the political crisis at school or in other settings. Second, the green *pañuelos* were a way for pro-choice activists to associate their efforts with a long-established history of women's protest in Argentina – the green bandanas were inspired by white *pañuelos* were worn by the *Madres de Plaza de Mayo,* the mothers of "disappeared" young people during the period of military dictatorship in the 1970s and 1980s who organized high-risk protests against the regime. Although the green bandana as a symbol for reproductive rights originated in Argentina, it has been used by pro-choice activists now across Latin America and even in the United States, where the color green has also been adopted as a symbol for universal abortion access.

Many participants told me that they wore a green bandana not only to every protest they attended, but also every time they left the house. One participant said, "you could see it tied in a million different ways – " like a headscarf, or even as a shirt. During our interview, she reached up and grabbed her green bandana from where it was still hanging from a shelf in her bedroom, almost three years after abortion was legalized, and demonstrated some of the ways it was worn. Another participant said that she "carried it with her everywhere. I don't anymore, but at that

time, I had it tied to my backpack or whatever I left my house with." Juli, who graduated from high school in 2018 at the height of the abortion protests, described to me how the *pañuelos* began to proliferate in Argentina. She speaks about both the green *pañuelos* and the light blue ones, adopted by the pro-life movement in response to pro-choice activists.

> *At first, you could only buy it from [the official national campaign] – the official green bandana funded their costs. Finding an official bandana was incredibly difficult… but either way, eventually everyone had them, because when you went to a protest there were non-official kiosks all over the place selling green, light blue, yellow, or pink bandanas to mean different things. They were everywhere. But I think at first, they became popular as a way of identifying yourself… like a mini protest at all times. You'd go to [your university] campus and go to class with a green bandana tied to your backpack and you'd see a ton of people with a green bandana, and you'd see a few with a light blue one. And then you'd give the ones with a light blue one a weird look – like, are you light blue? Are you green?*

Here, she describes how what started as a fundraising tactic for the official national pro-choice campaign blossomed into a universal symbol of the abortion debate for people on both sides. Juli describes the bandanas as a form of "mini-protest" – even if you weren't at a march, you could show your support for the movement just by carrying your backpack to class with a green scarf hanging from the strap. The bandanas were a way to encourage more girls to support the cause – if you showed up at school, for example, and realized just by looking around the hallways that many of your peers were in support of abortion, it would be much easier to come out in support as well. The usual processes of perception of political opinion within a space like a school were intensified by the performativity of being able to wear your political opinion in public. This expedited the crossing of the activation threshold necessary for many young women to voice support for abortion rights.

The green bandanas quickly seeped into the general culture of young women in Argentina. In this protest movement as in many others, politics bled into everyday life and permeated young women's experience of their social environments. In one particularly

compelling anecdote, Nicole, who was a very active member of the pro-choice movement through a feminist political advocacy organization called *Mala Junta,* told me about going clubbing with her green *pañuelo*.

> *When I think of the year 2018, I think of going out to a club, for example – I was younger and like, more loose. I used to go to parties and* boliches *[clubs] and when it was getting close to the date of the vote [the August legislative vote], I'd go up to someone and take a photo of them with the pañuelo and post it… when I went to a party when at that age I'd find anyone, literally anyone, and have them take the bandana and I'd ask them, are you in favor of abortion, can I take a picture of you?*

It's clear through this story just how important the abortion rights movement was to these girls' teenage experience. Some of Nicole's dominant memories of the year 2018, when she was 18 years old, are her experiences going out to parties and clubs and becoming conscious of and testing her peer's political convictions. She'd post pictures of her peers holding up green bandanas to her Instagram story while they were out at a party or club, publicizing their support to all of her followers. Abortion rights are closely related to cultural shifts that allow young women to feel "looser" in exploring their gender and sexuality. Thus, it makes sense that abortion rights would enter the conversation at a nightclub both physically and virtually, as clubs and parties are important places where young women construct and perform their gender identity based on those around them.

Going out and having fun became purposefully political. This kind of story is an extension of stories like the one Juli told me about showing up to school looking for backpacks with a green bandana and those had a light blue one – politics infiltrated culture for these young women. Exploring femininity and feeling freer and more "loose," as Nicole put it, were feelings very strongly connected to becoming active in politics. In this way, the process of girls growing up involved learning to be bold and vocal in their advocacy for the reproductive rights they

believed in so strongly. The use of the green *pañuelo,* in all its visual symbolism, was one stage on which this interaction between feminist politics and feminist culture played out.

An inherent and important undercurrent to these stories is the act of judging whether your peers are carrying a green bandana, a light blue bandana, or nothing. Celia, a current medical student, attended her first pro-choice protest on International Women's Day in 2018, described her use of the green *pañuelo* similarly to Juli*:* "I always carried it with me. I also carried it with me everywhere. I don't anymore. But at that time, I tied it to my backpack or whatever I left my house with. And it sometimes happened that I'd see the other one, the light blue one. And it was like, [gasp]." This simple description expresses the environment these girls were operating within, where many young women publicly showed their support for abortion rights, and the ones who didn't were a shock to the ones who did. The act of watching for, and noticing, the political statements of your peers was a key experience early on as the green wave was growing. Nicole, who carried her green *pañuelo* out to clubs, described the experience of finding out a close friend was pro-life. She explained, "I remember at that time I had a friend who was Catholic and went to church regularly, and she was pro-life. She had a light blue *pañuelo* and it was really shocking for us, because in my friend group, *nada que ver,* it was unheard of." Nicole then described how her friendship with this girl eroded during this time period, not because of any direct confrontation, but because they were not able to overcome their differences with regard to abortion rights. Pro-choice activism was a strong tie between social groups of young women, strong enough to exclude young women who did not participate.

Social relationships were often how my interviewees found themselves at a protest, displaying how political activity could become a part of friendships, deepening participant's social and emotional ties to the cause. Every single person said they had either one friend or

group of friends with whom they attended marches. Many had a particular friend in mind who they remembered as being important to their original participation in protests. Celia first went with a friend who she described as more *militante*, meaning activist. I asked her about the decision to attend her first protest, which was on March 8th, International Women's Day, of 2018. "I had one friend at school who had already gone to protests and was more *militante*. She was more involved politically earlier on, she was always telling us about the marches and even though I liked those things, I had never gone before… March 8th was coming up and we just figured we could go this time, try it out. And it was amazing." This kind of story, of friends encouraging each other to "try it out," came up over and over again in my interviews, emphasizing how important social networks were to the growth of the movement. Even some participants who identified as political activists started out this way. Elena, who is now a feminist organizer and works at the *Ministerio de Mujeres, Género, y Diversidad* of Argentina (the national ministry of Women, Gender, and Diversity), said a friend who was "more feminist" at that time brought her to a march in 2018, introducing her to the movement in which she would later become so heavily involved.

Juli described how this outreach extended even beyond her immediate group of friends: "There were always people asking if anyone needed people to go to a march with. Girls would say, I'm going with this person, she's going with that person… The most important thing was being at the march, first and foremost with your friends, but if anyone was left out we'd bring whoever wanted to join. There was no question – if someone needed company, they could come with us." This form of social networked-based recruitment to political protest was characterized by openness and generosity, making it easy and comfortable for people to get involved who many have been hesitant to do so alone. Additionally, many well-known actors, singers, and

other cultural figures publicized the marches on social media. One interviewee told me this was a common way to find out that protests were happening – "if you followed anyone who was remotely famous in some way in Argentina, like any actress, for example, or any journalist or whatever," you'd find out about protests. The lines between the protests themselves and Argentine popular culture were blurred; young women discovered protests through their connections to larger cultural institutions, and conversely, what happened at a protest could spill over into those same cultural spaces.

The Role of Joy in Protest: Celebrating Femininity and Empowerment

Young women in Argentina differed from previous generations of activists in one significant way: they brought celebration and joy into spaces of political debate. Although they describe frustration with their subordinated positions, their answer to those feelings was to create spaces characterized by joy and celebration, working to reframe femininity in a positive, confident light. Girlhood and womanhood were represented as something to be proud of.

When I asked my interviewees about the general atmosphere at the protests, every single one described a space filled with music, dancing, and a general spirit of celebration. They described stories of hugging strangers, being handed bottles of water by the person next to them when they told a friend they were thirsty, running into friends from other schools, or meeting new people wih whom they returned to future protests. Celia said, "there was such a good energy in the air. We all had this sense of companionship and partnership. Like we were all together, thinking about the same things and asking for the same things. Everyone was so *buena onda* [good vibes]." This feeling of *buena onda* came up in many interviews: a positive atmosphere and energy dominated participant's memories of the protests, not only through specific anecdotes

but also through their description of the feeling in the air. Protests were a welcoming and positive space for young women, especially for those who had never been to a protest before. This friendliness affirmed each participant's choice to attend and was key to a positive experience in a possibly unfamiliar environment; protesters found comfort in the joyful environment they found upon arrival. This atmosphere was important to fostering positive emotional ties to the movement and to the other protestors at each march.

Lara, a current law school student who was in her last year of high school at *el Nacional* in 2018 described the gatherings at the school before each feminist rally as "pregames," as if they were about to go to a party. Girls would meet outside their school, which was very close to where each protest march started, at the Plaza de Mayo,[4] where they would paint each other in green glitter, sell each other homemade t-shirts and jewelry, listen to music, and otherwise prepare to attend the march as a large group. These gatherings were organized by the student union of *el Nacional*, of which she was an elected member, and they'd publicize it through the network of student unions at other public high schools in Buenos Aires. These celebratory preparations were a space where high school girls could build their own community before joining the large-scale protest with women of all ages. Lara explained, "it was very common, for example, for some girls to go topless to the marches. So they would go to Congress topless or for example, like topless, but with body painting on, for example. It was great because everyone was doing it all together." These girls used their space of community organizing at their school, within the context of the larger protest movement, to turn their participation in political protest into an expression of freedom and bodily autonomy. They could perform femininity even in ways, like going topless, that would not be socially acceptable in other contexts. The marches

[4] The Plaza de Mayo is a historically important site of women's protest in Buenos Aires. The famous *Madres de Plaza de Mayo,* who coordinated protests against military dictatorship, met in this plaza.

were a space where young people could express their sexuality freely and ignore the rules at their schools, in their homes, or in most other spaces of society that they occupied if they felt that those rules were confining them. Although the protests were in support of the specific goal to legalize abortion, protester's actions were often in pursuit of a broader agenda about feeling freer in public. Free expression of femininity like going topless or meeting up to paint each other in glitter were ways of experimenting with a world free of restrictions on womens' sexuality, a project that is obviously related to and important to the fight for reproductive rights. Protest spaces provided a unique opportunity for young women to be freer and more creative with their self-expression, helping explain how the protest experience made young women feel more confident and empowered in their gender.

The spirit of joy and freedom was also instrumental in reframing the issue of abortion, usually taboo, as part of a larger vision of liberation worth celebrating. Camila, a current psychology student who was in high school at *el Nacional* at the time, described the feeling of joy at abortion rights protests as follows. "Even though the question of abortion isn't something happy, necessarily, it's not something to laugh about and no one wants to go through that themselves… the atmosphere at the protests allowed us to liberate ourselves in a way. I remember feeling, not consciously, but [still] like it was a party, since we were all jumping and singing and waving around our posters. It was happiness." I asked Camila what she thought the joyful atmosphere brought to the experience, and she replied, "I think it had to do with optimism and hope, and the idea of liberation. Because at some point, you have to feel free. And there's nothing more beautiful than to do it in a group – that's even more fulfilling." This feeling of freedom came up across most of my interviews. Girls felt empowered to express themselves in the space of the protests because they were in a group of like-minded people. The feeling of joy

and fulfillment that this brought them is partly what kept them coming back to protests each time they happened. They transformed joy into political action, and created spaces of liberation connected to the political rights they were fighting for. Additionally, associating abortion with joy and liberation made it a more politically salient topic. If abortion rights protests were framed as celebrating women's' freedom and empowerment, they were less easily picked apart and criticized by national media and politicians who were pro-life.

In the years before abortion was legalized, this spirit is what convinced pro-choice protesters that their vision would prevail. Martina told me about waiting to catch a bus home from the events outside the Congressional building with her friends after the abortion law failed in 2018, amidst a crowd of both pro-choice protesters in green *pañuelos* and pro-life protesters in light blue ones. That day it was pouring rain, and Martina and her friends "got to the bus stop and were hugging each other and comforting each other. When we got onto the bus, we started signing all the pro-abortion songs. There were pro-life protesters on the bus too, but they were completely silent. And yeah, I think even though we lost that day we knew that the movement was unstoppable, and that there was no way that this law wouldn't pass the next time. And that's what happened." The energy of the other pro-choice protesters, especially compared to the pro-life protesters, and the positivity they were able to sustain even after facing failure, is what convinced Martina that they'd eventually succeed and that the cause was still worth fighting for, showing again how the energy that these girls created was crucial to their political success.

Awakenings to Patriarchal Structures; Imaginations and Practice of Anti-Patriarchal Politics

The newfound forms of public expression of femininity and sexuality were part of a larger movement goal to dismantle patriarchal structures, primarily *at* the sites of protests

themselves but also in the larger context of Argentinean society. Even if young women activists could not reshape the world to their vision in one day, they could create a micro-manifestation of their larger political imagination during the protests themselves.

The explosive growth of the abortion rights movement in Argentina in 2018 coincided with another related political and cultural shift: an overwhelming outpouring of sexual assault allegations, known in Argentina as *escraches,*[5] similar to and just after the "Me Too" movement in the United States. Many of the girls that I interviewed went to the same high school, one of the biggest and most prestigious public high schools in Buenos Aires, and the wave of *escraches* over sexual assault hit their school particularly heavily. Among their high school class, the year 2018 was a significant turning point for this reason. At the time of the first large abortion rights protests, many of their male classmates had just been accused by girls in their classes and friend groups of various kinds of sexual assault. This fueled the fire of feminist protests, and heightened many of these girls' desires to create female-only spaces and reevaluate the role that their male classmates should have in their lives. One participant, who was in her first year of university in 2018, told me that "we had this feeling, not quite that every man was a predator, but something like that. And so it was threatening sometimes for us to see men in our protests because of the collective trauma that we had just had finding out [about the *escraches*]." In the year 2018, girls in high school and college were thinking about women-only spaces for the sake of their own safety and comfort in light of all the allegations against their male peers. They were drawn to protest not only because of their social ties as high school women, but also because their group solidarity was strengthened by fears about sexual assault from their male peers.

[5] The term *escraches* has a relevant political history in Argentina – it was coined in 1995 by H.I.J.O.S., an organization of children whose parents were murdered by the military dictatorship of 1976 to 1983, as a form of political action where protesters would surround the house of former public figures to publicly condemn them for "disappearances" and other human rights violations that happened during the dictatorship. The term is now used in Argentina to describe any denunciation of someone for wrongdoing.

Pro-choice protests were socially enforced as spaces free of men in order to accomplish two overarching goals: first, girls could celebrate their gender identity in a place free from any discomfort or judgment, and second, girls could be at the forefront of politics and social change. Abortion is not necessarily an issue that only women should care about, but the pro-choice marches were overwhelmingly composed of women, and this was a purposeful decision by organizers and participants. Augustina, who was involved in feminist organizing through *Mala Junta*, explained that men were given secondary tasks, like building things or carrying things, if they wanted to participate. "Boys could come, but they could only come as helpers," she said, "for example, if we had to put up a tent or a stand or something, or if we had to carry drums for the songs and chants, but they had to be behind everyone else. For me, the movement was about everyone, but women were the protagonists and the ones who had to be there front and center." At the protests, gender dynamics were reconfigured in order to serve what women needed and what their goals were, not the other way around. The space became a creative playground for young women to experiment with what leadership without men could look like, and how they could create their own movement.

The structure of the protests created opportunities for gender role reversals. Another participant told me, "the idea was that men [during protests] could take care of household chores, or like, if you were a mother, your husband could stay home with the kids or do the things that mothers and women usually do." Days with large-scale marches were an opportunity to reverse the existing normalized gender roles; men could work to undermine gender inequality not by marching but by taking care of the kids at home. Protest spaces that excluded men transformed the existing, entrenched gender binary into something that could empower women, changing the narrative about who was supposed to lead and create political change. Gender roles were

re-configured at these protests to center women as political actors and men as supporting figures, interrupting and counteracting the normal ways that gender hierarchies are reproduced through political discourse.

Another way in which protests could model a better world for women in Argentina was through the feeling of personal safety. I've already described how participants shared the feeling of *buena onda* in the crowd; the community they were part of at protests not only made participants feel happy, but also safe. In 2018, Paula had just moved from a small town in the province of Buenos Aires into the city in order to attend medical school at the University of Buenos Aires. "At that time I felt unsafe and scared often – a lot of things happened right outside my *facultad* [the medical school]." Going to her first protest showed Paula an alternative world where she could be on the street and feel safer, even in the middle of downtown Buenos Aires where she often felt uncertain. She describes,

> *I remember saying to [my friend] Elena that it was the first time that I was in the middle of a huge crowd and I felt safe, and that nothing would happen to me or that if something did happen to me I could ask for help from any of the people around me and they would be there for me and lend me a hand. I felt this for the first time in my life, so I celebrated it and enjoyed it.*

For the first time in her life, Paula says, she felt safe in a crowd. The feeling of celebration was connected to feeling safe, a very important part of the vision of these pro-choice protests, especially considering the waves of *escraches and* the prior *Ni Una Menos* movement against gender-based violence. The community and atmosphere of support that was created by each person at the protests created a world where women could feel safe in public, something that is in and of itself a political statement against patriarchal violence.

Being a part of a new, alternative kind of space at protests opened many of my participants' eyes to the ways their personal experiences had to do with gendered oppression.

Augustina, who had told me about the role men played at protests, explained that "all of a sudden, [with] every problem that we faced in my group of close friends, we started to find that it had something to do with the patriarchy, with pressures from men, with the limits on women's freedoms." After being so immersed in pro-choice activism, she and her friends started to see the world through the lens of feminism. Problems they faced that previously would have seemed unrelated to gender began to feel like the fault of sexism and patriarchal structures; i.e., they acquired new cognitive resources to identify and process gender discrimination, as Sherkat and Ellison (1997) outline. This was a kind of awakening to sentiments widespread in mid-century feminist organizing, represented by the popular "the personal is political" slogan to link individuals' challenges in life to political repression. Issues in Augstina's life and her friends' lives began to feel more and more related to their gender once they became immersed in the environment of feminist protests.

Some participants took what they were learning through pro-choice activism, specifically about the larger benefits of reproductive rights, and shared it with family members who were not present at protests. Celia and her sister, Martina, were able to convince their father to identify as pro-choice. Celia told me he originally told them he was against abortion, "He said, 'maybe it would be good to have the option to do it, like if someone needed it because of their social or economic situation, but I don't want it to be standardized at all or obligatory.' We told him, *no one is asking to make abortions mandatory*. And then he said, 'oh, well then, I guess I actually am in favor of it.' It was like, he didn't even know he was actually pro-choice" In this anecdote, Celia and Martina forced their father to really consider *why* he had the perspective that he did, and he realized throughout the conversation that the stance he took publicly did not reflect his actual beliefs. Within their own family, these girls were able to dismantle their fathers' political

stance, one that was clearly more about maintaining the status quo than actually about what women should have access to. Young girls with a fresh perspective on politics were uniquely positioned to facilitate those conversations, and they were already immersed in an environment focused on empathizing with women who have little access to resources and heavily restricted autonomy. Interactions like these, between the sisters and their father, are just one example of how young women began to evaluate their personal, family relationships through a feminist lens, and of how the tools that these young women learned through pro-choice activism could be put into practice to create political change outside of the space of the protest.

There are many other ways that my participants saw change happening in other forums and beyond the passage of abortion law. Martina, who was a bit older than Celia and already in university when the protests were taking place, said that she felt there had been a real cultural shift in Argentina in the last decade in terms of what kinds of gender discrimination was publicly accepted. She said, "if you watch TV from before 2015, the differences are huge... in just about five years we changed the paradigm and the ways people perceive women in society. And it also came with a huge awareness of many other issues like racism or homophobia. And we just, like, put it on the agenda. We put human rights on the agenda." Citing 2015, the year of the original *Ni Una Menos* protests that catalyzed the green wave, as the start, Martina believes what is acceptable in popular media has changed. And she believes national attention to other human rights issues has increased too, principally because she and her peers showed up for abortion rights and achieved success on a national stage. This comment also shows how advocating for one social cause can make you more attuned to other causes as well – participating in protests for one issue can raise overall political consciousness about more distant societal problems.

Lara, the current law school student, realized through pro-choice activism that the political system itself was inherently male-dominated, patriarchal, and not reflective of her or her friends' experiences. She explained, "I remember we realized 75% of the people who voted on the bill were not able to get pregnant because they were either men or women above the age of being able to get pregnant. So we started thinking, this whole representation thing is not really working for us, right?" This type of thinking, about whether the political system truly represented young women, was inspired by the question of abortion. She told me that after the abortion debates, she cared a lot more about knowing how the government worked, how laws were passed, and who represented her in Congress. The representative to the national legislature representing Buenos Aires elected in the years following the legalization of abortion in 2020 was a 21-year-old girl named Ofelia Fernandez, who had spoken at one of the most widely publicized hearings of the entire debate. Lara told me this as an example of how people began to care more about having more diversity of age and gender in who was democratically elected to represent her city. Fernandez's election to Congress, for her, represented the most powerful example of how feminism had influenced national politics, and how their pro-choice activism had changed the national political paradigm. Now, politics felt more closely aligned with and able to respond to young girls' personal experiences of gender discrimination.

Investment in Politics, Civil Rights, and Continued Forms of Activism

Every participant I spoke to had vivid memories of the moment the law passed. Those who were in the crowds outside Congress remembered the entire plaza erupting in joyous screams and cries as the vote tally passed the magic number. Even those who could not attend in person could remember exactly where they were. Camila told me, "I set an alarm for 4am

because I knew the vote would be done by then, and when it went off and I checked the results I started to cry right in front of my computer." Paula recounted, "I was at my sister's house, not in Buenos Aires, but I remember that I was in bed when the vote was supposed to come out in the middle of the night. I was following it on my phone, because they were broadcasting it live. I was, like, sleeping with one eye open watching the debate for hours. And I remember – I'm getting emotional just thinking about it – that I started sobbing alone in bed, partly because I was sad I wasn't there but also because I felt calm, euphoric, relieved, all at once."

Although the campaign to legalize abortion in many ways ended at that moment, those who were involved did not want to abandon their efforts. There were a variety of ways that young women stayed involved and continued to advocate for the values they had developed as protesters. Lara, who is in law school, described that she and many of her friends knew almost nothing about politics before they went to their first marches: "We were at the marches Googling things like 'How does Congress work? How many votes do you need to pass a law? What's a civil code?'... we didn't know anything." Their first experience really learning about the political system and committing it to memory happened during abortion protests when the debate first reached Congress. She told me, "this had a huge influence on me, because at that same time I started interning for a civil rights organization that was trying to elect a pro-choice representative to lead the Office of Defending Children and Adolescents… The whole abortion movement was very relevant for me to choose to study law… It led me to think oh, okay, no, it's actually very important to study law and to understand how it works for exactly these types of situations." Lara recognized the value of understanding how laws are passed because of her experience at the marches with her friends, where she realized how much she had to learn about the legislative

process. The movement inspired the internships she chose to pursue and the degree program she enrolled in, showing real commitment to legal work because of her experience with activism.

Others found different ways to bring feminist politics into their daily lives. Paula, who watched the abortion vote happen from her bedroom at her sister's house and is currently in medical school, described how the pro-choice movement made her a more empathetic person. She told me, "it left me with the ability to think more about other people… it gave me a better understanding of how people's needs can be different from one another." Participating in a social movement forced her to think of herself as part of a larger, diverse community, and made her think about how to serve that community. She explained that after 2020, the School of Medicine at the *Universidad de Buenos Aires*, where she is a student, implemented a mandatory course on human rights, the ideology of gender, and the question of abortion. All students and faculty are required to take this course to "learn an updated, modernized perspective on gender." Paula saw this as one good example of how the pro-choice movement changed the conversation about social equality and gender, especially in the context of medicine and healthcare.

Some of my participants stayed involved with feminist issues through attending annual national women's conferences, called *Encuentros Nacionales de Mujeres y Disidencias.* These large gatherings in different parts of Argentina about feminist issues have been taking place for over thirty years. They are attended by women from lower-, middle-, and upper-class sectors of Argentina, and are "autonomous, self-promoted, pluralistic, massive, noninstitutionalized, and critical of the establishment," and attendance can reach more than twenty thousand participants (Di Marco 2019: 167). The National Campaign for the Right to Abortion was born from a workshop at one of the *Encuentros* (Di Marco 2019). Augustina, who attended an *Encuentro* in 2019, explained them as "conferences every year for women, lesbians, or trans people, where we

debate a ton of topics like access to abortion, fatphobia, femicides, how to organize new marches… it's like, where the slogans we fight for all start." The younger generation sees these as spaces inclusive of anyone who has experienced gender oppression in any form, and where political agendas are set in a collaborative environment.

Celia, another medical student I mentioned earlier who spoke with her father about his opinions on abortion, had very memorable experiences at two of these conferences, one in 2019 with Augustina, and one in 2022. She described attending workshops on various topics related to feminism: "we debated things like, do *escraches* [assault accusations] really invite men into the movement? Is that a good strategy or not? We debated literally everything, there were a hundred workshops on different random things where you could talk with other women and *disidencias* [gender-nonconforming people] about each topic." Debates that surfaced during the national campaign for abortion continued at the *Encuentros*. The values that had become so important to many of my participants, that they had first experienced at pro-choice marches, could be institutionalized and formalized at these conferences, transforming social trends into something more permanent.

An additional way that some of my participants formalized their commitment to womens' politics was through becoming active members of *Mala Junta*, the feminist advocacy organization connected to the left-wing political front *Frente de Todos*, mentioned countless times by interviewees as important to this story. Participants who were involved with Mala Junta often took on leadership roles at protests, distributing posters or signs, passing out food or water, and leading *columnas* [sections] of women at a march. Mala Junta's branch in Buenos Aires also organized trips for anyone who wanted to attend the *Encuentros* in other cities.

Long-term investment in women's political issues was often inspired by a desire to be a part of the history of feminism in Argentina in a recognizable way. One of the most important ways that many of my interviewees saw the value in their experiences was through connecting themselves to a long lineage of women activists. They described much of their satisfaction over what they had accomplished as coming from the knowledge that they were a part of history in the same way that older generations had been before them. Paula explained, "[After the law was passed] we felt as though we had won, that we had done something, that our mothers, sisters, and grandmothers had done something, that we made history, and also that everyone in the streets had made history." The sense of accomplishment was not an individual one; rather, she felt that this was a collective accomplishment, building on the work of generations of women in Argentina. Juli felt similarly: "There was a picture that was shared everywhere of two older women marching at a protest with their canes. Those women were two of the most important activists for abortion in Argentina, Nelly Minyersky and Dora Barrancos,[6] who are now 96 and 84 years old. They represented so much for us." Political involvement was especially meaningful for these girls because they were continuing projects that had begun decades before they were born. Advocating on behalf of a large, intergenerational community of women is in part what helped convince these young women that they had a place in creating political change, helping to build investment in politics overall.

In Argentina, women's activism has a particular political value because of the legacy of the *Madres y Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo*, the collective of women activists whose children disappeared during the period of military dictatorship in Argentina in the late twentieth century. These women gathered in public at a time where any sort of political dissent was illegal and often punished through state-imposed torture or murder, and demanded information on the

[6] Two of the founding members of the National Campaign for Free, Safe, and Legal Abortion.

whereabouts of their children. Although the *Madres* did not necessarily call themselves feminists, interviews with many of them show that they were strong believers in the unique power that women held in standing up to political oppression. They did not include the fathers of their children in their activist efforts, for fear that they were emotionally incapable of making appeals to government officials, and that they would be more easily punished by the authorities (Di Marco 2010). Younger generations of female political activists in Argentina revere these women in more ways than just wearing green bandanas as a homage to the Madres' white ones. Augustina told me,

> *On the day the law was passed, people posted photos on Instagram of the* Madres y Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo *celebrating just like we were… including the Abuelas in social movements in Argentina is a way of vindicating them. They were the ones who really gave it their all and they were the first clear symbols of feminism in the time of dictatorship… they were oppressed, thrown in jail, and they're still out on the streets protesting even in their old age.*

As they built their own political movement and began to see themselves as political actors, all while coming of age as young women, pro-choice protesters in Argentina could look to the *Madres* for inspiration. Although their protests were ostensibly about abortion, they were actually about a lot more – they were fighting for autonomy and for women to be able to fully participate in democratic society. This fight, in the eyes of many young women in Argentina, began years ago when the *Madres* took to the plaza to defend democracy itself. Participation in pro-choice activism tied young women to a history of militant political advocacy led by women, something that they could be proud of for the rest of their lives. The joyful, spontaneous protest environment they created evolved into something more institutionalized and durable that could exist outside the scope of the campaign for legal abortion.

Conclusion

How do you convince people to care about a social cause? What kind of messages resonate with young women? How do protest spaces help individuals experiencing oppression of any form imagine what a better world could look like, and what benefits they could get from social change? These are all larger questions that I believe are prompted by this research project.

When considering the complete experience of joining a protest movement, the ways that people are mobilized to join and the personal impacts of protest participation are deeply intertwined, despite the fact that they are often studied separately. Mobilization and impacts are cyclical, and understanding the impacts of protesting is an underexplored way of explaining why people do it. I've shown how the ways that young women were mobilized to join pro-choice protests (activation threshold effects through the green bandanas, discourse among social groups at school, or the movement's alignment with existing group mobilization against sexual assault) forged group solidarity based on gender, allowing for experimentation with anti-patriarchal leadership and political action, joyful celebrations of femininity, and a broader embrace of feminist ethics and politics at protests and in daily life. These experiences were memorably empowering for participants, which then became a mechanism of continued mobilization. The alternative world built at these protests was one that young women valued and wanted to stay a part of, not only explaining their continued attendance at protests but also inspiring lasting changes in other parts of their lives.

My research thus shows the potential impacts of protest participation on young women, and how protest participation can affect their gender identity and their personal politics. I have built on existing research into the efficacy and impact of social movements, and on the impact of social movements on individual identity, adding to this body of knowledge by looking

specifically at gender and gender-based movements. I found that through activism, young women were able to gain tools to help them fight against gender discrimination in their daily lives, and they were able to build confidence in their ability to create political and social change. Young women rearticulated their gender identity through political action, and in turn, their newfound understandings of their gender identity helped them find a place in politics and political activism.

The positive experiences that young women had as protest participants can shed some light on why the movement grew so rapidly. Most of my interviewees had no idea before attending their first protest that the movement would become so important to their lives – even those who remembered feeling hesitant before their first march were hooked almost immediately. Though it may have been their social ties that got them to participate originally, it was the liberation and empowerment they felt while there that kept them coming back to each march. This is how the movement sustained momentum despite setbacks.

There are obviously dissenting narratives that I did not investigate through this research. There were pro-life protesters present at marches on the days of Congressional voting, albeit forming a minority of the members of the crowd, and their experiences were certainly different from the experiences of my pro-choice participants. Further research could explore how pro-life protesters were mobilized and the takeaways they experienced from their oppositional form of political organizing. Further research could also break down the effects of pro-choice protest participation by race or socioeconomic status, or investigate the effects of participation on older generations of women. But my goal was to capture the exceptionally unifying space that a young generation of *pro-choice* organizers and protesters created in order to dismantle the status quo. What I have described is a model of how to galvanize the public to create change.

The energy for this cause that began in Argentina moved throughout Latin America – about a year after it was legalized in Argentina, abortion became legal in Colombia as well, and just last year, the Supreme Court of Mexico deemed it unconstitutional to criminalize abortion, paving the way for a law to legalize abortion in Mexico too. The color green made its way across borders, continuing to symbolize the fight for access to reproductive healthcare, as did the energy and spirit of protesters that began in Argentina. The crowds in Colombia and Mexico resemble those in Argentina, filled with young women dressed in green, many covered in glitter and face paint, proudly waving their green bandanas. The movement for reproductive rights, framed as an empowering vision of what it means to be a young woman, clearly has far-reaching appeal in Latin America and beyond.

In the United States, we have much to learn from what women in Argentina were able to accomplish. Since Roe v. Wade was overturned in the summer of 2022, new threats to the formerly universal right to abortion are introduced each day. We are faced with a growing pro-life movement that is gaining momentum every day; dozens of states have completely banned abortion, many have restricted access to it, and it is under active threat in others. Despite all this, we are seeing no nationally coordinated activist movement to protect the reproductive rights we once had, and we certainly do not have anything close to the momentum that was built by Argentinian organizers. Part of the problem is the geographical discrepancies over whether abortion is legal or not – it is difficult to convince large numbers of women in New York City, for example, where large-scale political protests are much easier to organize, to protest on behalf of women in the deep South. By better understanding what the experience of activism is like for young women, what drew people to participate in creating political change in the context of

reproductive rights, and how they maintained connection to activism, we may be able to build a better vision for how to mobilize people to defend abortion rights and womens' autonomy.

In Argentina, positive and meaningful protest experiences were created by putting forward an liberating narrative of femininity, centering joy and celebration, placing women in highly visible leadership roles at the center of political action, and treating abortion rights as just one part of the issue of larger patriarchal forces controlling national politics. These are what I believe to be the main lessons of what was accomplished in Argentina, and the strategies that comprise a compelling vision for reproductive justice politics in the United States.

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