

Mobilizing and Contesting Motherhood in the Revolutionary Family: Women's Activism in Mexico City, 1971–1989

Emma Stodder

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**Seminar advisor: Mae Ngai
Faculty advisor: José Moya**

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Glossary and Acronyms

DFS – Dirección Federal de Seguridad – Federal Security Directorate

Coalición de Mujeres Feministas – Coalition of Feminist Women

Comité Pro-Defensa de Presos Perseguidos, Desaparecidos y Exiliados Políticos de México
– Committee for the Defense of Persecuted Prisoners, the Disappeared, and Political Exiles of Mexico (1977-1987)

Comité Eureka – 1987-present

MAS – Mujeres en Acción Solidaria – Women in Solidarity Action (1971–1974)

MLM – Movimiento de Liberación de las Mujeres – Women’s Liberation Movement

PCM – Partido Comunista Mexicana – Mexican Communist Party

PRI – Partido Revolucionario Institucional – Institutional Revolutionary Party

PRT – Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores – Workers’ Revolutionary Party

UNAM – Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México – National Autonomous University of Mexico

On Mother's Day in 1971, the Mujeres en Acción Solidaria (Women in Solidarity Action, MAS) gathered to stage a protest in front of the Monument to the Mother in Mexico City, carrying a sign proclaiming, "PROTESTA CONTRA EL MITO DE LA MADRE" ("Protest against the myth of the mother").¹ Though the protest was very small, many remember it as the opening salvo of second-wave feminism in Mexico.² In the 1970s, MAS and its successor groups and coalitions built the foundations of Mexico's academic and intellectual "*nueva ola*"³ (new wave) feminism first in Mexico City and then nationally, through conferences, periodicals, and demonstrations, protesting and discussing how to change the status of women in Mexican society.⁴

Just over two miles away, eighteen years later, members of the Comité Eureka, a group of mothers advocating for justice for their children disappeared and killed by the state during the 1970s "dirty war," carried out a different sort of Mother's Day protest: Simulating their own crucifixion on large wooden crosses placed in front of the Palacio Nacional, they acted out their suffering as the sacrificing mothers of *desaparecidos*.⁵ Unlike MAS' demonstration, this was neither professedly feminist nor the initiation of a movement. Begun in 1977 by Rosario Ibarra de Piedra and a coalition of mothers protesting the *desaparición forzada* (forcible disappearance) of their children accused of participation in urban and rural guerrilla movements, the mothers' movement started by founding the Committee for the Defense of Persecuted Prisoners, the Disappeared, and Political Exiles of Mexico (which became known as Comité Eureka). In the late '70s, the mothers of the disappeared entered the national consciousness as political actors

¹ Gutiérrez, "Marta Acevedo: La marcha que ha durado cuatro décadas," 44.

² Ibid., 45.

³ Mexico's equivalent of second-wave feminism; Lau Jaiven, *La nueva ola del feminismo en México*, 18.

⁴ Carey, *Plaza of Sacrifices*, 182-4.

⁵ Maier, *Las madres de los desaparecidos: un nuevo mito materno en América Latina?*, 192.

through high-profile public protests, and formed alliances with *nueva ola* groups and leftist political parties, continuing their activism today.

MAS' initial Mother's Day protest against the "myth of the mother"—the idealized Mexican mother—and organizing in the late 1970s and 1980s by the mothers of the disappeared ostensibly evoke opposing poles of women's activism. One found its impulse for feminist activism in rejecting the traditional construct of motherhood as a woman's sole role in society, while the other drew its motivation from and presented its image in an embrace of motherhood. However, on closer examination, these two movements shared a social and historical context—one intimately tied to the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional's (Institutional Revolutionary Party, PRI) conception of itself and the Mexican state—in which each used the idea of motherhood to advocate for change within Mexico's socially and politically constrained system. The *nueva ola* of feminism that swept through Mexico in the 1970s is itself a link between MAS and the mothers of the disappeared: beginning with MAS and continuing as feminist groups divided and proliferated in the capital and nationally, the feminists of the 1970s did critical work to create space in the public sphere—both physical and discursive—for women's political activism, particularly to speak out against the PRI's policies at the intersection of authoritarianism and gender.

The group that began as MAS has been the subject of a number of brief historical, political science, and sociological studies—each of which, like the women involved in the movement, identify it as the first of its kind in Mexico—but generally only by way of introduction to the rise of second-wave feminism in Mexico City and its numerous groups and fragmentary coalitions.⁶ Each discusses the group's activities, leaders, its split in 1974 and

⁶ For example: Elaine Carey, *Plaza of Sacrifices*; Margara Millan, "Politics of Translation in Contemporary Mexican Feminism" and "Revistas y polıticas de traduccion del feminismo mexicano contemporaneo"; Ana Lau Jaiven,

transition into the Movimiento de la Liberación de Mujeres (Women's Liberation Movement, MLM), and its integration in the Coalición de Mujeres Feministas (Coalition of Feminist Women) in 1977 to focus on reproductive rights. However, this activism and the groups' writing about it has not been sufficiently examined within the necessary framework of Mexican nationalism and the so-called "revolutionary family," and the PRI's pretensions of political and ideological hegemony, all of which intimately affect gender and reproductive politics. Comparisons and contrasts between the *nueva ola*'s politics of motherhood and that of Comité Eureka have not yet been sufficiently or explicitly explored.

The women of the *nueva ola*, particularly those whose activism began with MAS, began writing the movement's history almost immediately. Their articles in the journal *fem* offer a wealth of material, from chronologies of the movement's development to feminist analyses of authoritarianism to translations of historical feminist thinkers' work. The editorial board, composed of feminist academics, intellectuals, and journalists, also used *fem* to reach out to and represent other women's activist groups, such as the mothers of the disappeared. *Cihuat*, the journal of the Coalición de Mujeres Feministas, provides accounts of the Coalición's first two years of work to change Mexico's abortion legislation, which made the procedure a crime under any circumstances.⁷

Historical scholarship on Mexico's mothers of the disappeared is scant, perhaps because Comité Eureka is still active—its purpose remains current and relevant in 2015 Mexico.

Elizabeth Maier's *Las madres de los desaparecidos: ¿Un nuevo mito materno en América*

Latina? is the most substantive work, featuring extensive interviews with the members of Comité

Nueva ola del feminismo en México; Cristina González, *Autonomía y alianzas: El movimiento feminista en la ciudad de México, 1976–1986*.

⁷ Ortiz-Ortega, "The Feminist Demand for Legal Abortion: A Disruption of the Mexican State and Catholic Church Relations (1871–1995) is a long-term history of this topic, and explains Mexico's abortion legislation.

Eureka, but falls more into the field of women's studies than history. Journalistic accounts of the Comité's activism abound, most notably those by Elena Poniatowska,⁸ and several dissertations in political science have examined this topic in the context of political change in Mexico and the rise of human rights NGOs, but without significant analysis relating to the specificities of Mexican nationalism, or with relation to the *nueva ola*. Most primary source material relating to Comité Eureka appears in interviews with members, especially Ibarra de Piedra as she became the most well-known, in published secondary sources including Maier's *Las madres de los desaparecidos*, as well as articles in *fem*, including interviews with members and articles about the movement.

My thesis explores how the early *nueva ola* feminist movements and the mothers of the disappeared presented themselves to the Mexican state in spaces of nationalistic cultural significance and in emerging and existing intellectual fora to protest, politicize, and push the boundaries of women's roles in Mexican society, while mobilizing contrasting portrayals of motherhood. Through an examination of the writing, protests, and symbolism employed by the early *nueva ola* feminists and the mothers of the disappeared, I argue that each contested the PRI's social and political narrative of the revolutionary family⁹ by challenging hegemonic national conceptions of motherhood.

⁸Poniatowska, *Fuerte es el silencio* (1980), *Domingo 7* (1988).

⁹ I examine and define this term in chapter one.

**Chapter One:
Women and Mexico's Political-Cultural 'Revolutionary Family'**

Both the *nueva ola* of feminism and the mothers of the dirty war's disappeared emerged in the intersecting milieus of Mexico's restrictive political culture; the "culture of dissent"¹⁰ that developed with the rise of the New Left and the student protests of the 1950s–1960s, culminating in the student movement of 1968; and the politically and socially restricted nature of women's expected place in the nation. Women remained outside of Mexico's formal political processes until the 1950s (and decades passed before a significant number of women held elected office), but women and mothers—and often the rhetorical and ideological conflation of the two—were constructed by the exclusively male political elite as formative components to the PRI's totalizing "revolutionary" nationalism..

The advent of Mexico's Mother's Day in 1922 as a national celebration shortly after the conclusion of the Revolution marks the incorporation of the reverence of women—but only as mothers—into the new Mexican state's public performance of its still-developing nationalism. Sociologist Nira Yuval-Davis' scholarship on gender and nationalism illuminates the implications of this early emphasis on women and motherhood in Mexican nationalism. Women's relationship with nation, according to Yuval-Davis, begins with their role as agents of "biological reproduction of the nation."¹¹ They also, Yuval-Davis writes, "are associated in the collective imagination with children and therefore with the collective, as well as the familial, future," and are conceived of as "the bearers of the collectivity's honour."¹² Similarly, Yuval-Davis posits that "it is women, especially older women, who are given the roles of the cultural

¹⁰ Carey, "Women and Men on the Edge of Modernity: A Cultural History of 1968, Mexico," x.

¹¹ Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation*, 26.

¹² *Ibid.*, 45.

reproducers of ‘the nation.’”¹³ In *Woman – Nation – State*, Yuval-Davis and her co-editor Floya Anthias write that women also serve as “ideological reproducers” for a nation and its values and norms, and sense of itself as a community (i.e. nationalism).¹⁴

The Revolution, Institutionalization, and the Revolutionary Family

The Mexican Revolution ultimately gave rise to these matters of nationalism, and the role of women in a nation newly conceiving of itself through a composite of progressive and deeply traditional political and social ideas. Lasting from 1910 until 1920, the Revolution was a factional and sprawling violent conflict that evolved into a civil war, defined by few unifying goals other than bringing an end to Porfirismo (the 1876–1911 rule of Porfirio Díaz) and later to institute a new constitution.¹⁵ The Constitution of 1917 enshrined a progressive set of social and political policies including land reform, universal male suffrage and secular education, and labor rights.¹⁶

The first two decades after the Revolution saw the consolidation of a new political class composed primarily of generals who had fought in the Revolution, often with close ties to economic elites, and who participated through a developing official party apparatus in the processes of constructing the post-Revolution nation and novel forms of Mexican nationalism.¹⁷

In 1929, with the founding of the official party of the government, the Partido Nacional

¹³ Ibid., 37.

¹⁴ Yuval-Davis and Anthias, eds., *Woman – Nation – State*, 7.

¹⁵ See Joseph and Buchenau, *Mexico’s Once and Future Revolution: Social Upheaval and the Challenge of Rule since the Late Nineteenth Century* or Knight, *The Mexican Revolution* (1986) for a history of the Revolution

¹⁶ “Constitución Federal de 1917 de La República de México,” n.d. Georgetown University Political Database of the Americas.

¹⁷ Including the notion of a *mestizo* nation, the shared heritage of Spanish-descended and indigenous Mexicans.

Revolucionario (National Revolutionary Party, PNR), the governing party began a process that historians Gilbert Joseph and Jürgen Buchenau call “institutionalizing itself.”¹⁸

This process continued as the PNR, along with neutralizing electoral opposition, with the guidance of President Lázaro Cárdenas (1934–1940), recast itself in 1938 as the Partido de la Revolución Mexicana (Party of the Mexican Revolution, PRM). The official party incorporated campesinos, laborers, the military, and civil servants as four popular sectors, tying the governing PRM directly to the citizenry through a corporatist structure, drawing in a vast and varied constituency.¹⁹ The party underwent its final name change in 1946, becoming the Partido Institucional Revolucionario, which, in Joseph and Buchenau’s terms, “represented a retooling of Cárdenas’s PRM to better serve the oligarchy of state bureaucrats, industrialists, financiers, and international investors.”²⁰ The PRI dominated the political system of its own creation for the rest of the century (and won back the presidency in 2012 after a two-term respite), mobilizing a powerful apparatus of electoral politics, patronage, co-optation, and a totalizing nationalism built on an ideology of inclusion complemented by careful exclusion and a heroic, simplified version of the 1910–1920 Revolution.

An essential facet of this nationalism is the concept of the “revolutionary family,” a term employed by PRI politicians, but primarily historians and political scientists, to express a variety of meanings about the PRI political system and its vision of Mexico and Mexicans. In its most general sense, the “revolutionary family” refers to the PRI itself. Joseph and Buchenau equate the “revolutionary family” with the pantheon of heroes of the Mexican Revolution that the PRI repurposed as characters in a coherent history connected to the many un- or partially realized

¹⁸ Joseph and Buchenau, *Mexico’s Once and Future Revolution: Social Upheaval and the Challenge of Rule since the Late Nineteenth Century*, 11.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 134.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 12.

policies in the Constitution of 1917.²¹ However, this explanation is not accordant with others, and speaks more to the PRI's idea of itself as the agent charged with bringing the ideals of the Revolution—which were, in fact, varied, and not all consistent with one another—to fruition under the auspices of the state. Most define the “revolutionary family” as either the upper echelon of PRI bureaucracy²² or the entire party apparatus, including the corporative sectors.²³ The discrepancies among historians' uses of the term indicates a measure of the complexity and the paradoxical nature of certain aspects of the PRI system (the idea of an “institutionalized revolution,” for example), and raises the question of the political status of those who remain outside the bounds of the family.

For the purposes of this paper, I use “revolutionary family” to refer to the total party apparatus, but with an emphasis on the term's metaphorical resonances.²⁴ The PRI²⁵ constructed its relationship with citizens as paternalistic. The PRI distributed land, mediated labor disputes and told industrial workers when they could and could not strike, and provided the means—in many cases the only political means—through which to participate in electoral politics (the term electoral is used loosely here). I consider the term in a gendered sense, pairing the nationalistic reverence for the Mexican mother with the constructs of the revolutionary family—as a nationalistic vision of political unity at the ballot box and in the belief that the PRI had indeed

²¹ Ibid., 11.

²² Fallaw, *Religion and State Formation in Postrevolutionary Mexico*, 4, 154, 163; Tovar, “Learning From (and Capturing) Spaces: Memory and History in Mexico City Novels,” 168.

²³ Zolov, *Refried Elvis: The Rise of Mexican Counterculture*, 2; Marvan-Laborde, “Building Democracy in Mexico: Party, Citizen and the Rule of Law,” 152.

²⁴ Zolov's explanation in *Refried Elvis*, 2-9, is similar, analyzing why “family” is metaphorically apt for the system of inclusion and exclusion (also referring to the PRI as “domestic council,” which I find less apt) but focuses on the role of 1960s youth and the parallels between defying the authority of the nuclear family and that of the revolutionary family; he notes the mother's important role, but does not examine it.

²⁵ I use PRI from here onward to signify the governing party of the post-Revolution twentieth century, encompassing the PNR and PRM unless otherwise specified.

institutionalized the nebulous ideals of the Revolution—from the president at the head of the family down to the children-citizenry.

The analogue for the mother of the revolutionary family is less clear. It could be argued that the revolutionary family has no revolutionary mother, as the president-father wields so much power. But given the essential place of women and mothers in nation formation and nationalism—idealized as the domestic, child-bearing, moral compasses of Mexican society—perhaps the revolutionary family does have a mother. But she is envisioned by the head of house as something of a stay-at-home mom, charged with supporting her husband and producing children and shaping them into proper members of the citizenry. She thus occupies a sort of liminal, contradictory space within the PRI social contract: ideally apolitical but also patriotic, producing new generations of political participants in the nation but never one herself. The members of the *nueva ola* feminist groups and the mothers of the disappeared leveled their challenges to the *mito materno* from a place of profound dissatisfaction with their allotted space in the revolutionary family as it existed for them in everyday life, far from the PRI's lofty nationalistic metaphors.

Cold War Mexico

Of course, the construct of the revolutionary family was only ever just that. Its power was in the extent to which the PRI used it to present the nation as unified, working toward progress and modernity as envisioned in the 1917 constitution, with the PRI at the helm. An examination of leftist movements in 1970s and 1980s Mexico must be situated within the Cold War and the attendant continuity and change to the PRI's and the citizenry's ideas and experiences of the revolutionary family. The PRI's electoral stability belies the national social, political, and

economic upheavals of the post-World War II decades. Years of seemingly miraculous economic growth through import-substitution industrialization gave rise to urbanization, demographic growth, and an expanding educated and consumerist middle class; the miracle's collapse in the 1950s increased economic stratification and political unrest.²⁶ The Cold War was "rarely cold" in Latin America.²⁷ Mexico suffered no coups or military dictatorships, and the number of citizens "disappeared" by state terror between the 1960s and early 1980s is small compared to those in other Latin American countries; nevertheless, this was not a time of peace in Mexico (although it remains an under-studied sphere of the Cold War).²⁸ Anticommunism had long been a potent force within the PRI, and intensified during the 1950s and 1960s as the Cold War globalized and the Cuban Revolution alarmed conservative governments across the hemisphere, while the party became uneasy over domestic threats to its political hegemony posed by New Left politics, student activism, the emergence of a guerrilla left, and unsanctioned labor disputes by independent unions.²⁹ In response, the PRI subsumed some labor organizations into the party's corporatist structure, while leaving recalcitrant unions outside the benefits of the party, answering large-scale strikes such as the independent railroad-workers union's strike of 1958-9 by violently subduing the protests and imprisoning union leadership.³⁰

The most studied social movement of post-Revolution Mexico is the student movement of 1968 in Mexico City, which drew thousands of university and preparatory school students out to the streets of the capital. The movement, as well as the preceding politically turbulent decades serve as prelude to the growth of feminism and women's political activism in Mexico during the

²⁶ See Pensado, *Rebel Mexico: Student Unrest and Authoritarian Political Culture During the Long Sixties*, 19–49.

²⁷ Joseph, "What We Now Know and Should Know," 3.

²⁸ In part because of Mexico's legal restrictions on archives; material from this period was made available beginning in 2002. (In March 2015, however, the material was closed off again.)

²⁹ Jaime Pensado's *Rebel Mexico* offers a thorough analysis of 1950s and 1960s Mexican political history; works by Seth Fein and Eric Zolov offer cultural histories of this period, featuring the strengthening of the PRI's conservatism and anticommunism.

³⁰ Pensado, *Rebel Mexico*, 37.

1970s. Composed of a broad coalition of activists male and female, the movement took off in the summer of 1968, joining a worldwide moment of youth activism. Marching en masse down the capital's avenues and clashing with federal police, the students demanded that the state release political prisoners, including student and labor activists, and not intervene in universities.

Though the government decried the activists as communist infiltrators, the movement was politically moderate; and many students became politicized through their participation in the summer's meetings, strikes, protests, and encounters with the state's robust security apparatus.³¹

While members of leftist groups, such as the student arm and the women's union of the Mexican Communist Party, participated, centrist students directed the movement's goals, urging democratic and university reform. On October 2 of that year, the movement ended as federal troops fired on a massive assembly of student activists at Tlatelolco Plaza, killing hundreds and arresting several thousand.³² The government's violent response to the student movement—encapsulated by its hysterical anticommunist rhetoric and the massacre at Tlatelolco Plaza—laid bare the PRI's authoritarianism and willingness to physically eliminate threats to its illusive political unity.

Although men and women participated in the movement in nearly equal numbers, women held few leadership roles. Just ten served on the movement's leading committee, out of a total of 200 members,³³ and while many joined the day-to-day actions alongside the men, others were relegated to driving men to protests and making them coffee and dinner. Nevertheless, participation in the movement was many women's introduction to political activism—including

³¹ Jaime Pensado offers a thorough account of the student movement of 1968 and other student activism preceding it during the 1950s and 1960s in *Rebel Mexico: Student Unrest and Authoritarian Political Culture During the Long Sixties*, as does Elaine Carey in *Plaza of Sacrifices*.

³² Lessie Jo Frazier and Deborah Cohen, "Defining the Space of Mexico '68: Heroic Masculinity in the Prison and 'Women' in the Streets," *Hispanic American Historical Review*, *Duke University Press* 83, no. 4 (2003): 617–60, 625.

³³ Carey, "Women and Men on the Edge of Modernity," 163.

two of MAS' most prominent members, Marta Acevedo and Marta Lamas.³⁴ Mothers of students were actively recruited by the movement's organizing committee, often with pamphlets appealing to their protective duty as mothers.³⁵ Some joined in the hopes of protecting their children from the police, and some effectively joined by visiting their children and other students being held in clandestine or city prisons, advocating for their release, or demanding information about their whereabouts, like the mothers of the dirty war's disappeared did a decade later.

Historian Elaine Carey argues that women's activism in '68 in and the movement's brief renewal three years later, which also met with harsh state repression, led them to "[question] gender and power and [apply] theories of democracy and liberation that they learned on the streets in 1968 and 1971 to their own lives."³⁶ While gender issues were not among the movement's goals,³⁷ some women came away from '68 with a new consciousness of the intervention of the political into their own lives, and sought to create change on a more personal level than university and democratic reform.

Women's activism and feminism in Mexico

Although '68 marks a turning point for feminism in Mexico, this was by no means the beginning of the history of women's political mobilization in Mexico. Indeed, anthropologist Marta Lamas, one of the early members of MAS and later the leader of the MLM, calls the *nueva ola* a "resurgence" of Mexican feminism.³⁸ One of Mexico's first feminist movements arose during the Revolution, and women's movements worked over the next decades to advance their

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Carey, "Women and Men on the Edge of Modernity," 192-3. Some fathers participated, but mothers were actively recruited by the Comité Nacional de Huelga (the movement's leadership).

³⁶ Carey, *Plaza of Sacrifices*, 177.

³⁷ Ibid., 5.

³⁸ Lamas, "Algunas características del movimiento feminista en Ciudad de México," 143.

civil and social rights (although often incrementally), thereby actively contradicting the notion that women resided solely in the private, domestic sphere or as accessories to male-oriented political agendas.³⁹

Women's political status became a subject of national dialogue in the 1920s, as the governing elite debated what civil rights to allow them. President Lázaro Cárdenas (1934–1940) initiated a party-wide effort to bring women into the political sphere, or at least into adherence to the governing party's policies, while also advocating unsuccessfully for women's suffrage.⁴⁰ While Cárdenas voiced his support for women's suffrage and proposed a constitutional amendment to grant women the vote, the fact that neither the bill nor his rhetoric translated into legislative action (a rarity in PRI politics) indicates that Cárdenas' goal was not so much suffrage as “incorporating women as allies into the political scheme”—allies, not partners.⁴¹ By the 1940s, the governing party viewed women as potentially politically threatening if they were to wield the right to vote, because the opposition party was Catholic and enjoyed strong support from women (although this perception also illustrates the prevailing view of women as domestic subjects whose provenance was motherhood and moral—and therefore also Catholic—guidance of children and the country).⁴²

Women gained the right to vote in national elections in 1953, making 1958 the first presidential election in which Mexico had universal suffrage.⁴³ Their involvement in party politics increased after that point, to the greatest extent on the Left, though most women still

³⁹ Victoria Rodríguez's edited volume, *Women's Participation in Mexican Political Life*, offers discussions of women's political participation, both institutional and informal: such as Carmen Ramos Escandón's “Women and Power in Mexico: The Forgotten Heritage, 1880-1954” and Nikki Craske's “Mexican Women's Inclusion into Political Life: A Latin American Perspective.”

⁴⁰ Ramos Escandón, “Women and Power in Mexico: The Forgotten Heritage: 1880–1954,” 97.

⁴¹ Ibid. Ortiz-Ortega, “The Feminist Demand for Legal Abortion,” 94, argues this was also a result of state collaboration with the Church.

⁴² Ibid., 98.

⁴³ Ibid.

occupied a role more akin to ally, or junior partner, than true political actor. For example, in 1964, women in the Partido Comunista Mexicana (Mexican Communist Party, PCM) founded the Unión de Mujeres Mexicanas (Union of Mexican Women) in order to address women's issues and to take on more leadership within the party apparatus.⁴⁴ Members of the Union became involved in the student movement of '68 as the PCM supported student activism and sought to take political action against the PRI through the movement; but members also took on activism independent of the party in 1968, in what would be a formative political experience for the Union both as an arm of the Communist Party and as a political association of women, many of whom were mothers.⁴⁵

Just as the student movement of 1968 was part of a national and international moment of unrest and potential political transformation, the Mexican feminist movement, particularly in the 1970s, situated itself as the inheritor of earlier Mexican women's activism, and within the growing international feminist movement centered in Europe and the United States, as feminist theory from abroad made its way into the universities.⁴⁶ Middle-class women dominated international second-wave feminism; so, too, in Mexico was the *nueva ola* "middle class and bourgeois."⁴⁷ As such, some women who had become politicized and radicalized in 1968 rejected feminism as a viable system of thought and action to create social or political change, seeing its nexus in middle-class university women as a sign that the movement was too entrenched in preexisting societal systems to advocate an upheaval of the Mexican social and political order.⁴⁸ Many of these women remained within the partied Left, often in women's or university sectors of the Communist Party or the Trotskyist party, rejecting feminism until the

⁴⁴ Carey, "Women and Men on the Edge of Modernity," 166.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 166-7.

⁴⁶ Millán, "Politics of Translation in Contemporary Mexican Feminism," 151.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 187.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 186-7.

late 1970s, when they began working with feminist coalitions for abortion legislation. Until that point, the relationship between the women of the early *nueva ola* and the women and men of the Left was nearly as fraught as that between the *nueva ola* and the PRI.

**Chapter Two:
Mother's Day Protests and Voluntary Motherhood: The *Nueva Ola*'s First Decade**

Writing decades later about the earliest days of second-wave feminism in Mexico, women involved in the movement recount a common origin story: MAS' 1971 Mother's Day protest. The group formed in Mexico City in 1970 is recognized as the first group of the Mexican *nueva ola* of feminism. The nascent organization, unofficially led by Marta Acevedo, began planning its first public demonstration in March of the next year. With the protest—to be held on Mother's Day, to “counter the myth of the mother”—MAS hoped to gain new members and bring public attention to women's objection to “the idealization of motherhood,” which they viewed as the force behind women's politically and biologically constrained role in Mexican society.⁴⁹ In April, the group adopted the name “Mujeres en Acción Solidaria” somewhat spontaneously, renaming itself with a vague political bent as it sought a permit to conduct its protest at the base of the Monument to the Mother on a deeply traditional, patriotic occasion.

On the day of the protest, nothing went quite as planned. A small group of MAS' members⁵⁰ gathered at the Monument to the Mother, holding signs bearing the protest's purpose and passing out flyers declaring, “Somos madres...¿Y qué más?” (We are mothers...and what else?).⁵¹ One hundred and fifty spectators looked on, including a news channel's camera crew and a scantily dressed group of women called Señoritas de México, who apparently thought they were attending a celebration of motherhood rather than a protest.⁵² According to Marta Lamas,

⁴⁹ Acevedo, *El Diez de mayo*, 68.

⁵⁰ No source specifies the number of participants, though the protest is mentioned in numerous primary (e.g. Acevedo et al., “Piezas de un rompecabezas”; Lamas, “Mis 10 primeros años: el MAS y el MLM”) and secondary sources (Lau Jaiven, *La nueva ola del feminismo en México*; González, *Autonomía y alianzas*). Acevedo et al. “Piezas de un rompecabezas,” 13 notes only that “After this action at the Monument of the Mother, fifteen women of the 150 people who attended [the protest] joined the group” (translation by the author); Carey's *Plaza of Sacrifices*, 183, states that “only fifteen MAS members actually attended,” citing Acevedo et al., but this appears to be the result of a translation error.

⁵¹ Acevedo, *El diez de mayo*, 67. Translation by the author.

⁵² Acevedo et al., “Piezas de un rompecabezas,” 13.

who did not join MAS until several months later, the “decision to go out onto the street cost the incipient MAS the desertion of two-thirds of its members,” since many feared protesting publicly in the capital, in case of violent reprisals from the state.⁵³ Nevertheless, MAS’ protest ultimately proved successful: the movement grew within the year, and the protest had, by ten years later, become considered the first chapter of the advent story of Mexican *nueva ola* feminism.

The story then leaps ahead six months, to a conference held at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (National Autonomous University of Mexico, UNAM) in Mexico City.⁵⁴ There, Susan Sontag delivered a speech, introducing many of the women present to feminist theory, including the notion that “the personal is political.” Also during the conference, Acevedo passed around a sign-up sheet inviting women to join MAS. Women eagerly registered, and MAS’ numbers grew, allowing its leaders to envision more activism for the group into 1972.⁵⁵

Mother’s Day and Mexican Nationalism

MAS’ Mother’s Day demonstration, small and haphazard as it was, took on a significance and symbolism exceeding its initial purpose of contesting the conventional meaning of Mother’s Day and gauging interest in feminism. What may have first seemed to the members of MAS to be a mishap of a protest is thought of as the starting point for what would become an influential social, political, and intellectual movement. The protest allows for an examination of several fundamental issues that the *nueva ola* feminists of the 1970s took up, beginning on Mother’s Day in 1971: motherhood and the *mito materno*, as well as Mexican nationalism and public space, both physical and discursive.

⁵³ Lamas, “Mis diez primeros años: el MAS y el MLM,” 8. Translation by the author.

⁵⁴ Ibid. And Acevedo et al., “Piezas de un rompecabezas,” 13.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

By selecting Mother's Day, and the Monument to the Mother as the site of the protest to "counter the myth of the mother," MAS did not simply tie together a convenient day and location. Nor was the selection of the *mito materno* a casual choice in how the group presented itself to the women of Mexico City. Día de la Madre has traditionally seen celebrations quite distinct from the politically provocative 1971 and 1989 protests by MAS and Comité Eureka.

Initiated in 1922 at the urging of journalist Rafael Alducín, founder of the newspaper *Excélsior*,⁵⁶ with the support of influential theorist of postrevolutionary Mexican nationalism, then-Minister of Education José Vasconcelos,⁵⁷ as well as the Catholic Church, the holiday finds its origins at the intersection of social conservatism and the nationalism of the early post-revolutionary Mexican government. Alducín's editorials from the spring of 1922 illustrate the motivations behind the establishment of the holiday, as he condemned the progressive, socialist policies of the governor of Yucatán—including collaboration with the nascent local feminist movement to host the country's first feminist congress in 1916 and consider broader societal roles for women.⁵⁸ The February 1922 translation and dissemination in Yucatán of a pamphlet on birth control written by Margaret Sanger provided the spark for Alducín to act upon his distress over the last six years' developments in Yucatán.⁵⁹

On April 13, Alducín proposed a holiday celebrating mothers, in the model of the United States' Mother's Day, directing particular venom toward Sanger's pamphlet:

Now that, in the far south of the country, a suicidal and criminal campaign against motherhood has begun, when in Yucatán official elements have not hesitated to issue grotesque propaganda, denigrating the highest function of the mother, which consists not only of giving birth but of educating the children their bodies have

⁵⁶ *Excélsior*, Mexico City's second-oldest newspaper, counts Mother's Day as part of its own history. See the 2013 article "El Día de Las Madres, Una Fiesta Que Nació En Excélsior" ("Mother's Day, a Holiday Born in Excélsior").

⁵⁷ Vasconcelos, in *La raza cósmica*, posited Mexico as the predestined and uniquely advanced combination of white (Spanish) and indigenous peoples, a "cosmic race," forming the basis of Mexico's "mestizo nationalism," the fusion of its pre-Columbian and colonial history.

⁵⁸ See Olcott, *Revolutionary Women in Postrevolutionary Mexico*, 28–32.

⁵⁹ Acevedo, *El Diez de Mayo*, 7–54 includes facsimiles of Alducín's editorials.

formed, it is essential that the entire country demonstrate ... [that] we know how to honor the woman who gives us life.⁶⁰

Framing the rise of progressive social policies and feminism in Yucatán and the “grotesque propaganda” in Sanger’s pamphlet as “suicidal and criminal,” Alducín called upon not just Mexicans in the far-flung southeastern region, but “the entire country” to combat the dishonor and threat to the institution of motherhood that he saw in the very idea of birth control. Alducín articulates a radical interpretation of this notion in his use of the word “suicidal,” employing inflammatory and somewhat cloudy rhetoric to imply that by distributing Sanger’s pamphlet and proposing to limit the physiological functions of motherhood, women in Yucatán planned to destroy their own motherhood, and thereby themselves. Alducín rhetorically equates women and mothers, and suggests that if a woman is not a mother, or chooses not to reproduce, she is hardly alive. By another reading, Alducín portrays the social-political activism in Yucatán as suicide for the institution of motherhood, which he frames as the foundation of Mexican society.

Alducín’s words and the widespread support they received—from conservatives in Mérida and politicians in Mexico City—demonstrate the prevailing view of women’s role as constrained to that of mothers and life-givers of the nation, in which feminism, or even information about birth control, had no place.⁶¹ The PRI’s attitude toward the idea of birth control remained similarly oppositional through the time of MAS’ demonstration.⁶² This was due in part to the social conservatism of a predominantly Catholic nation and the influence of the Catholic Church,⁶³ and the PRI’s corresponding politics, as well as to the fact that the mere idea of birth control (to say nothing of abortion)—that is, the conversion of motherhood into a

⁶⁰ Alducín, Rafael, *Excelsior*, April 13, 1922 quoted in *Ibid.*, 10. Translation by the author.

⁶¹ Acevedo, *El Diez de Mayo*, 24, 37, 52-54.

⁶² Ortiz-Ortega, “The Feminist Demand for Legal Abortion: A Disruption of the Mexican State and Catholic Church Relations (1871-1995),” Chapter 4.

⁶³ Despite anticlericalism in the Constitution of 1917 in national politics until the late 1930s, Church and state maintained what Ortiz-Ortega refers to as a “Gentleman’s Agreement” over social issues including abortion.

voluntary institution, subject to the woman's choice—is antithetical to the idea of the revolutionary family.

On the first Día de la Madre, May 10, 1922, public festivities occurred nationwide.⁶⁴ The holiday, which Marta Acevedo describes as a “glorification of the essence of the mother exclusively in her physiological aspect,”⁶⁵ enshrined what MAS would later call the *mito materno* as an early foundation of Mexico's new nationalism, even before the new government had consolidated its paternalistic character or “institutionalized” the Revolution.

Día de la Madre continued annually as an unofficial holiday, serving as a staging ground for politicians to incorporate women into Mexican political life—at least rhetorically and symbolically—even as women did not vote in a national election until 1958. The holiday's primary purpose for the PRI, however, was to reinforce and celebrate women's role in the revolutionary family: biological and ideological reproducers of Mexico and Mexican nationalism, docile and unquestioning of their purpose as mothers. On Mother's Day in 1949, Día de la Madre entered the capital's physical landscape as President Miguel Alemán (1946–1952) led the unveiling ceremony for the newly constructed Monument to the Mother.⁶⁶

The site of MAS' protest, then, is also part of the celebratory history of the PRI's Mother's Day. The monument stands near the intersection of two major avenues, a towering stone rendering of a woman cradling a child. The plaque at the base of the statue reads, “A la que nos amó antes de conocernos” (“To the one who loved us before she knew us”).⁶⁷ The inscription invites conflicting interpretations, but all fall within the confines of the nationalistic reverence of the Mexican mother who lovingly produces and fosters the children-citizenry. “Us” could, of

⁶⁴ Ibid., 51–55.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 52.

⁶⁶ James Smith, “Celebrating ‘Mythical Figures,’ the Long-Suffering Mothers of Mexico,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 11, 2000, <http://articles.latimes.com/2000/may/11/news/mn-28879>.

course, be understood to mean the entire Mexican populace, with the monument serving as recognition of mothers' essential role in families and in society. But considering the political purpose of the founding and yearly celebration of Día de la Madre, and the fact that women had not yet been granted the right to vote in national elections, the inscription and the monument as a whole more likely reflect a gendered dynamic of political exclusion and inclusion. Perhaps, then, "us" refers solely to men, the children-citizenry who depend upon women to give birth to them and then inculcate them with the mores of citizenship and nationalism. The unspecified "us," while seemingly broadly inclusive, is instead exclusionary: mothers (which is to say, women, who are either mothers or potential mothers) are left out of this national "us," giving birth to the male citizens who are "us" but without full rights of citizenship themselves.

The monument brings the "myth of the mother" into public space, joining the statues of the Revolution's heroes that dot the streets of the capital—the physical markers of the PRI's mythologized and simplified version of Mexican history.⁶⁸ MAS' decision to stage its demonstration in front of the Monument to the Mother on Mother's Day, therefore, gave the protest force as a subversion of the PRI's traditional means of celebrating mothers and their place in the revolutionary family, as much a fundament of Mexican nationalism as the retroactively pacified heroes of the Revolution.

Opening Space: Feminism, Reproductive Rights, and the Left

By 1972, when MAS began its first "actions," the group was composed of "leftist militants, former nuns, artists, and various foreign women living in Mexico" who identified with

⁶⁸ Zolov, *Refried Elvis*, 4.

its fusion of Marxism and feminist theory.⁶⁹ Operating at first only within Mexico City, MAS met in two sections, a northern and a southern group, supposed to be based on where members lived, but actually split on ideological lines.⁷⁰ The southern group, of which Acevedo and Lamas were members, quickly took on projects corresponding with Marxist-feminist analyses of the links between gender and economic status. Meanwhile, each group organized itself into smaller assemblages, gathering weekly to discuss and develop feminist theory in relation to their personal lives, and how to constitute themselves as autonomous political actors within the Left and the authoritarian PRI system.⁷¹

MAS also began disseminating its ideas in a bulletin, as well as in major Mexican leftist periodicals,⁷² and by organizing conferences at universities in the capital and around the country. Reaching out to women laborers and unions that included women in their membership, MAS began supporting strikes and non-state unions that August, while also advocating to define domestic work as work.⁷³ This work, though largely symbolic, was important to MAS' commitment to solidarity through practical applications of its theories to the lives of those who could not attend university conferences or subscribe to highly theoretical leftist periodicals. The purpose of supporting Mexico's working-class women had not only been *concientización* (critical consciousness-raising), but also to integrate them into MAS' membership, and thus

⁶⁹ Lamas, "Mis diez primeros años: el MAS y el MLM," 8. As for the group's numbers, González, *Autonomía y alianzas*, 88 estimates fifty to sixty; Acevedo et al., "Piezas de un rompecabezas," 12 says 40; Carey, *Plaza of Sacrifices*, 183 says 150 total members in two groups of 75, citing Lamas, "Mis diez primeros años" a few sentences later, but these numbers do not appear in the article.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Acevedo et al., "Piezas de un rompecabezas," 15. Translation by the author.

⁷² Such as *Punto Crítico* and *Siempre*, according to Acevedo et al., "Piezas de un rompecabezas."

⁷³ González, *Autonomía y alianzas*, 89. The group supported strikes at the Rivetex and Medalla de Oro textile factories, each of which employed mostly women, and attended meetings of the independent union Frente Auténtico de Trabajo (Authentic Workers' Front).

create a multiclass alliance of radical feminists, with MAS at the vanguard.⁷⁴ This quickly proved unsuccessful.⁷⁵

Throughout the decade, Mexican feminist groups, like those in the US and Europe, debated how to shape their relationship with the Left. While MAS (and later the MLM and the coalition) shared some goals of the male-led Left, principally that of “opening space”⁷⁶ for political change through opposing the PRI system, Lamas and others felt that such change could not meaningfully occur until the implementation of significant changes to the status of women, particularly accessibility of birth control and legalization of abortion. The vanguard feminist groups of the 1970s prioritized reproductive rights, concentrating much of their theory and organizing to the idea of “voluntary motherhood,” emphasizing making motherhood for women not just a question of when and how many children they would have, but a choice of *whether* they would have children at all. This matter of personal choice is, of course, fundamentally a question of agency, intimately linked to politics and the revolutionary family.

One of the theoretical underpinnings of the Mexican *nueva ola* was the comparison and connection feminists drew between the PRI’s political authoritarianism and familial authoritarianism; that is, the authoritarian, *machista* behavior of their husbands and fathers. Anthropologist Lourdes Arizpe addressed this connection in her 1978 article “Familia, desarrollo y autoritarismo” (“Family, Development and Authoritarianism”).⁷⁷ She writes,

The family is indispensable, from a point of view that in order to reproduce...the standards of acceptable behavior for the State. In Latin America, one of these standards is the extreme authoritarianism that makes the despotism of the father of

⁷⁴ Millán, “Revistas y políticas de traducción del feminismo mexicano contemporáneo,” 821-823.

⁷⁵ González, *Autonomía y alianzas*, 92. Translation by the author.

⁷⁶ Millán, “Revistas y políticas de traducción del feminismo mexicano contemporáneo,” 823.

⁷⁷ Arizpe, “Familia, desarrollo, y autoritarismo,” *fem* vol. 2, no. 7. Arizpe was a member of the Movimiento Feminista Mexicano (see Lamas, “Mis diez primeros años: el MAS y el MLM,” 11), part of the Coalición de Mujeres Feministas, which I discuss later in this chapter. She was then a professor at El Colegio de México and a founding member of *fem*’s editorial board.

the family support and reflect the authoritarianism of the State. From there stems the interest in conserving the family.⁷⁸

Arizpe's explanation of the place of the family—and, by extension, women and mothers—in Mexican society aligns with Yuval-Davis' theory of women as the “ideological reproducers” as well as the “biological reproducers” of nation. The family prepares and socializes members of the children-citizenry in an authoritarian political culture, as patriarchy and paternal authoritarianism in the home mirror the same phenomena in the PRI. The state, by way of the nuclear family, invests women in its ongoing project of state formation via the construct of the revolutionary family, which Arizpe, like other *nueva ola* feminists, identified as an apparatus of sociopolitical control. Therefore, familial patriarchal authoritarianism and political patriarchal authoritarianisms are not merely coexistent, and one is not merely a microcosm of the other; rather, they work in tandem. Arizpe explains the political implication of this connection with relation to feminist activism: “To destroy patriarchal despotism in the family, therefore, is to threaten political totalitarianism.”⁷⁹ Mexico's political system was not totalitarian (Arizpe was also referring to military dictatorships in the region), but it was authoritarian. Thus, as the *nueva ola* feminists mobilized the idea of “voluntary motherhood” and questioned the “myth of the mother,” as well as the dynamics of their relationships with men in their own families, they also contested the PRI's political authority.

By extension, women's leftist activism for “voluntary motherhood” and abortion legalization was an inherently political and deeply personal challenge not only to status quo-gender dynamics or related legislation. It was also an existential threat to the PRI's political culture and the hegemony it sought over Mexico's symbolic, historical, and political discursive space, which, as the *nueva ola* feminists recognized, was always gendered. The fight to make

⁷⁸ Ibid., 5. Translation by the author.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

their biological role as mothers voluntary within their own families is at once a personal, familial struggle and a political one. If the nuclear family is the treasured miniature and fundament of the political-social revolutionary family, with the mother at the base, feminists' contestation of the idealization of motherhood is a personal-political challenge to the PRI itself.

Along with opposing the PRI, the *nueva ola* feminists quickly came to think of themselves as "autonomous from the Left while being part of it," as Marta Lamas wrote in 1981.⁸⁰ Some had previously worked within the organized Left, but found that the parties' platforms did not sufficiently address the issues women faced or allow women leadership within the party structure.⁸¹ Consequently, the women of MAS reassessed their relationship with the Left, having initially intended to cooperate with parties, particularly the Partido Comunista Mexicana (Mexican Communist Party, PCM).⁸² The *nueva ola* feminists had not expected, it seems, to encounter the same sexism from members of opposition parties as they had from the PRI's narrative of women's role in Mexican society. Instead, according to Lamas, the Left's response to the budding feminist movement was oppositional. She wrote in 1981,

Although they accused us of being petit-bourgeois and sectarian, almost the entirety of the first nucleus (we called ourselves Mujeres en Acción Solidaria) that began the movement in Mexico came from the Left ... and many were in romantic relationships with men within the Left. Maybe this was one of the main reasons for the continuous questioning of 'Why a group for women?' and, 'What validity does your proposal have?'⁸³

⁸⁰ Lamas, "Feminismo y organizaciones políticas de izquierda en México," *fem* vol. 5, no. 17, 35. Translation by the author.

⁸¹ The Trotskyist Party, the Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores, was the exception, according to Lamas and others. Barry Carr offers discusses the organized Left (though not with regard to the Left's position on feminism or women's issues), as well as its collaborations with and similarities to the PRI; see "The Fate of the Vanguard under a Revolutionary State: Marxism's Contribution to the Construction of the Great Arch," in Joseph and Nugent, *Everyday Forms of State Formation*.

⁸² The other main parties of the Left included several socialist and Maoist parties, student-activist organizations at UNAM, and the Trotskyist Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores (Revolutionary Workers' Party, PRT).

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 35.

The similarities between the role the Left expected women to fulfill in opposition politics and the role the PRI expected of women in the revolutionary family became ever more apparent. Lamas continues,

During the period before 1975 there were showdowns between the feminists and the Left; I recall very clearly one I participated in, in 1972, when the Communist Party accused us of being imperialists and pro-Yankee because of our demand for [legalization of] abortion. To struggle for [legalization of] abortion within the context of ‘Give birth, Latin mothers, give birth to more *guerrilleros*’ was absolutely taboo.⁸⁴

Facing this attitude from the Left—nearly identical to the demand that women be the reproducers of Mexican nationalism within the revolutionary family—MAS and its successor groups insisted upon the feminist movement’s autonomy within the Left.⁸⁵

MAS’ Mother’s Day protest and the *nueva ola*’s focus on making motherhood voluntary rather than obligatory—within the nuclear family, the revolutionary family, and the Left—reflect the desire not to be characters in the contemporary and intersecting myths of Mexican nationalism. These myths had always made the personal political, enlisting women’s bodies in the nation-building and revolution-institutionalizing process.

“Libre y Gratuito”: New Coalitions and Voluntary Motherhood

By the mid-1970s, the landscape of the *nueva ola* had shifted. A new assortment of groups and coalitions populated the movement, which had now begun to devote most of its activism toward legalizing, or at the least decriminalizing, abortion in Mexico, revolving around the notion of “voluntary motherhood.” The first half of the decade saw near-constant

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Millán, “Politics of Translation,” 154.

proliferation and fissuring of leftist feminist groups in Mexico City.⁸⁶ In 1974, MAS split due to internal disagreements over the group's ideological bases and priorities.⁸⁷ Core members and leaders left the group, forming the Movimiento de la Liberación de Mujeres (Women's Liberation Movement, MLM) in 1975, led by Marta Lamas.⁸⁸ Other, mostly short-lived groups, formed, and a number of feminist periodicals began publication.⁸⁹

Mexico City hosted the 1975 United Nations International Women's Year conference, in the aftermath of which the *nueva ola* constituted itself as a series of coalitions focused on reforming abortion legislation. By playing host to the highly visible conference, the PRI attempted to improve its image with regard to women's issues and demonstrate to Mexico and the world that women, too, were enjoying the fruits of 1970s political reform in the wake of '68.⁹⁰ Furthermore, the PRI had taken note of Mexican feminists' political activism and the rise of second-wave feminism worldwide. The party used the conference to at least present the image of extending an invitation to the feminist groups to participate in the effort to make changes that would benefit Mexican women, beginning with the equal rights bill President Luis Echeverría (1970–1976) proposed at the conference's opening ceremony.⁹¹ In practice, though, the conference and the new legislation read to some *nueva ola* feminists as a coercive attempt to neutralize their opposition to the PRI and the construct of the revolutionary family.⁹² While some

⁸⁶ The purpose of this thesis is not to chart the rise and fall of the movement's groups and coalitions. This has been done elsewhere; see Lau Jaiven, *La nueva ola del feminismo en México* and González, *Autonomía y alianzas*.

⁸⁷ Lamas, "Mis diez primeros años," 9.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ For example, Movimiento Nacional de Mujeres (National Women's Movement, MNM), Movimiento Feminista Mexicana (Mexican Feminist Movement, MFM), Colectivo La Revuelta (Riot Collective) and its journal, *La Revuelta*, and numerous others; Lamas discusses many in "Mis diez primeros años," 10–14. Millán identifies these as "seed groups" in "Politics of Translation," 166 and "Revistas y políticas de traducción del feminismo mexicano contemporáneo," 821. A number of lesbian-feminist groups emerged in the second half of the decade as well.

⁹⁰ I discuss the 1970s "democratic opening" in chapter three.

⁹¹ Carey, *Plaza of Sacrifices*, 185.

⁹² Acevedo et al., "Piezas de un rompecabezas," 23.

nueva ola groups participated, others, including the MLM, organized a “counter-conference.”⁹³

In March of that year, an MLM press release lambasted the conference as a publicity stunt for the PRI and the UN Year as normative and inadequate. At the counter-conference, *nueva ola* feminists discussed their objections to the conference’s platform of “equality, development, and peace,” which they found more likely to “perpetuate economic, racial, and sexual inequality” than dismantle exploitative systems in Mexico or elsewhere.⁹⁴ In contrast, women activists and feminists from across the globe attended the UN conference, including about 2,000 Mexican women, lauding it as a harbinger of feminism’s development and transnational unity. Historian Jocelyn Olcott describes the conference as a “watershed moment in transnational feminism,” equal parts “political performance,” celebration, and discord over geopolitics and feminist theory and praxis.⁹⁵

Despite some *nueva ola* feminists’ distaste for the conference, it nevertheless proved a significant moment for Mexican feminism, catalyzing a search for new means of lobbying for change for reproductive rights. In the wake of the conference and the counter-conference, several *nueva ola* groups, including MLM, found themselves on uncertain political footing, having rejected the PRI’s gesture of inclusion to the feminist left, which they saw as co-optation. Determined to form a cohesive movement, five groups and two publications, including the newly established *fem*,⁹⁶ formed the Coalición de Mujeres Feministas Mexicanas (Coalition of Mexican Feminist Women) in 1976.⁹⁷ The advent of the Coalición marks the point at which, according to

⁹³ Reprinted in Acevedo et al., “Piezas de un rompecabezas,” 23.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Olcott, “Cold War Conflicts and Cheap Cabaret: Sexual Politics at the 1975 United Nations International Women’s Year Conference,” 735. Olcott discusses North-South divides among attendees, as well as the new prominence of lesbian feminist groups. Olcott also offers a brief historiography of the UN Year.

⁹⁶ Founded in 1976. *Fem*’s editorial board and contributors included *nueva ola* members and Mexican journalists, academics, and social critics. Volume 1, No. 2 was devoted entirely to the subject of abortion.

⁹⁷ Acevedo et al., “Piezas de un rompecabezas,” 26.

Lamas, “The campaign to achieve the legalization of abortion became the core issue of struggle for all of the feminist groups.”⁹⁸

Although the idea of “voluntary motherhood,” or *maternidad voluntaria*, came to the fore in 1976, it was not an idea original to the Coalición. The term originated in nineteenth-century US women’s activism for the legalization of abortion,⁹⁹ and entered the *nueva ola* lexicon during MAS’ conferences in 1972.¹⁰⁰ Between 1972 and 1974, MAS dedicated several conferences to discussion of altering Mexico’s existing laws outlawing and criminalizing abortion.¹⁰¹

“Voluntary motherhood” served as the expression of MAS’ stance against what it called the *mito materno*, and its activism for the decriminalization of abortion, which had met with immediate opposition from the Left and the PRI alike. A 1978 issue of *Cihuat*, the Coalición’s periodical, printed the group’s proposal to reform Mexico’s existing abortion legislation, which imposed prison sentences upon women who aborted pregnancies, driving many to seek clandestine procedures. Centering its argument around “eliminating all punishment for voluntary abortion,” the Coalición proposed that abortion procedures and contraceptives be made available “libre y gratuito” (“freely and free of charge”), or at least affordable, and urges the implementation of sex education nationwide for “all age levels,” including “campaigns of consciousness-raising so that men assume responsibility for contraception.”¹⁰² The proposal thus makes specific demands of the state, framing the decriminalization, legalization, and accessibility of professionally performed abortions as matters of public health, to prevent thousands of deaths of women due to

⁹⁸ Lamas, “Mis 10 primeros años: el MAS y el MLM,” 12. The coalition took on the issue of violence against women as its other principal point of activism.

⁹⁹ Ortiz-Ortega, “The Feminist Demand for Legal Abortion,” 16.

¹⁰⁰ Lamas, “La despenalización del aborto en México,” 157.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 156.

¹⁰² “La Coalición de Mujeres Feministas Propone,” *Cihuat* vol. 2, no. 6, 5. Translation by the author.

poorly performed, illegal abortions annually. The Coalición emphasized that abortion is a woman's "the last resort."¹⁰³

Although the PRI still rejected the idea of abortion, fears of overpopulation motivated it to encourage the use of birth control beginning in 1976, passing legislation to institute a family planning program in the hopes of reducing the population growth rate.¹⁰⁴ Undergoing decline and crisis in the 1970s, the Mexican economy could not support a population growing at about 3.5% each year, with a fertility rate of 5.4 and a low infant mortality rate, each due to improved nutrition since mid-century. Partially as a result of the family planning program, the fertility rate dropped by 0.8 in six years, and continued to decrease over the next decade.¹⁰⁵ Nevertheless, the PRI's newly pragmatic approach to family planning did not make it more receptive to the feminist demand for voluntary motherhood.

In September of 1977, the Coalición organized its second National Conference on Abortion, where members drafted a bill to decriminalize abortion. That December, the Coalición attempted to present the bill, the "Law of Voluntary Motherhood,"¹⁰⁶ to the Cámara de Diputados.¹⁰⁷ Staging a demonstration outside until they were allowed in for an audience with a PRI legislator, whose sponsorship they would have to receive in order for the bill to go to Congress, Coalición members chanted and held signs with their demands for "aborto libre y gratuito" and statistics about the danger of clandestine abortions.¹⁰⁸ (Lamas remembered the

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Joseph and Buchenau, *Mexico's Once and Future Revolution*, 173.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Lamas, "Mis diez primeros años," 12.

¹⁰⁷ Mexico's lower legislative house

¹⁰⁸ "El aborto no es un gusto, es un último recurso," *Cihuat* vol. 2, no. 6, 5.

protest as “a very fun meeting.”¹⁰⁹) Congress did not take up the bill; Lamas writes that a PRI legislator “received us coldly and put our proposal in a drawer.”¹¹⁰

Now 150 members strong, the Coalición’s major public effort of 1978, in the wake of its failed legislative initiative, was a Mother’s Day protest march.¹¹¹ Instead of protesting the broader problem of women’s constrained role in Mexican society as MAS had in 1971, the 1978 protest focused on abortion rights. In a march of “*mujeres elutadas*” or “mourning women,” carrying funeral wreaths—Coalición members mourned the deaths of women who had fallen victim to poorly performed illegal abortions.¹¹² The group marched down one of Mexico City’s thoroughfares to the Monument to the Mother. Similar to MAS’ Mother’s Day protest seven years before, the *mujeres enlutadas* brought their contestation of the PRI’s idealization of motherhood to its symbolic and patriotic locus, but now with an explicitly political agenda. Taking a different tack from its unsuccessful legislative attempt at abortion rights, the Coalición’s protest converted the normative, nationalist celebration of motherhood and the revolutionary family into a funeral march for those who, by the Coalición’s account, could have been saved by the availability of safe, legal abortion procedures.

Between 1978 and 1980, the Coalición began working with non-feminist women’s activist groups, including women’s groups from within Left parties, with the aim of creating broad support for abortion legislation reform.¹¹³ While the PCM had previously seen the *nueva ola* as “petit-bourgeois and sectarian,” a position held by the party’s male and female members, by 1979 it had PCM had reversed this stance. Even women distinctly of the PCM “old guard”

¹⁰⁹ Lamas, “Mis diez primeros años,” 12.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ “El aborto no es un gusto, es un último recurso,” *Cihuat* vol. 2, no. 6, 5.

¹¹² Lamas, “Mis diez primeros años,” 13.

¹¹³ Lamas, “Feminismo y organizaciones políticas de izquierda en México,” 36. Including women’s wing of the PCM, the PRT, and student groups from UNAM.

joined in debates about voluntary motherhood in 1980. The Coalición had also built ties with non-party organizations, for example the Guerrero branch of the mothers of the disappeared.¹¹⁴

Four years after the Coalición's initial legislative attempt to decriminalize abortion, it cooperated with a new, broader coalition to try again, this time with the newly re-legalized PCM. A new coalition had formed in 1979 out of the *nueva ola*'s engagement with the women of the PCM, the Frente Nacional por la Liberación y los Derechos de la Mujer (National Front for the Liberation and Rights of Women, FNLIDM), joining the Coalición's work.¹¹⁵ Together, in 1981, the groups drafted and promulgated a bill to decriminalize abortion, hoping that the support of PCM legislators would guide the bill into law. However, this, like the 1977 bill, failed.¹¹⁶

According to Lamas, the backlash the coalitions' bill met with from the Catholic Church and the right, combined with its lukewarm reception in congress, "generated a situation of disappointment, frustration, and fear," that resulted in "generalized demobilization" of the abortion rights movement.¹¹⁷ Momentum gone, the coalitions soon dissolved and the *nueva ola*'s voluntary motherhood campaign practically faded away until the 1990s.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid. Formed on International Women's Day in 1979; included women from the PCM, various UNAM groups, lesbian feminist groups, and others.

¹¹⁶ Lamas, "La despenalización del aborto en México," 157-8.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

Chapter Three:
**“Grief has transformed these women into political fighters”: Motherist Politics in the
 Revolutionary Family**

In 1975, Rosario Ibarra de Piedra’s twenty-year-old son, Jesús, disappeared.¹¹⁸ Detained by state security forces and accused of participation in the urban guerrilla group Liga Comunista 23 de Septiembre, Jesús Ibarra de Piedra was never found—he might as well have disappeared into thin air.¹¹⁹ Exactly two years after her son’s disappearance, Ibarra, with the families of other political prisoners in Monterrey,¹²⁰ went to the city’s Palacio de Gobierno to demand information from the Congress of Nuevo León about their sons and daughters’ charges and whereabouts.¹²¹ Although they were permitted to enter Congress, as Ibarra tells it, it was only because her husband was “a well respected person in Monterrey.”¹²² Ibarra spoke at the meeting, stepping into an early leadership role. The meeting produced no results—and was the first of many such meetings—but stands as the group’s first public action as Mexico’s first committee of relatives of *desaparecidos* and political prisoners, having formed just two days earlier.

The families came together at the initiative of political prisoners in Monterrey who had been Ibarra’s son’s “comrades in arms.” In 1976, they proposed to her the formation of “a group that would fight for amnesty” for political prisoners nationwide. After collaborating with the prisoners to distribute a newsletter about the group’s intentions, the Ibarra family and “the relatives of the 27 political prisoners met, to organize the first Comité.”¹²³ The rallying cry of the

¹¹⁸ Poniatowska, *Fuerte es el silencio*, 84, 95.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 91-2; 5.

¹²⁰ Capital of the northern state of Nuevo León.

¹²¹ Rosario Ibarra de Piedra, qtd. in Maier, *Las madres de los desaparecidos: ¿Un nuevo mito materno en América Latina?*, 138.

¹²² *Ibid.*

¹²³ *Ibid.* Translation by the author.

Comité quickly became the now-famous “Vivos se los llevaron, vivos los queremos”: “They were taken alive, we want them back alive.”¹²⁴

Throughout 1977, the Comité protested locally and attempted further meetings with legislators in Monterrey, but, achieving no results, began to connect with similar groups in other states. In her efforts to link the Comité with groups in states as distant from Nuevo León as Guerrero,¹²⁵ Ibarra says, the task was primarily “to search for the wives and mothers of the *desaparecidos*,” as partners in a national effort for an amnesty law and to gather information withheld by the government about numbers of political prisoners and missing *guerrilleros* in each state.¹²⁶ The Comité found that the federal government’s treatment of armed left in the north had been similar to its response to that in the south, so “Mexican jails were saturated with political prisoners.”¹²⁷ This was a direct result (indeed, the intended result) of the PRI’s repression of the armed left, using the federal police in cooperation with local police and paramilitary forces to imprison and kill disruptive groups; this policy came to the fore in the 1970s under Echeverría, but was consistent with the PRI’s Cold War domestic security policy even before 1968.¹²⁸

Mexico in the Latin American ’70s

In the 1970s, right-wing military dictatorships supported by the US and brought in by coups d’état across the region—Argentina, Chile, Brazil, Uruguay, Peru, El Salvador, Guatemala—unleashed years, in some cases decades, of state terror against alleged “communist

¹²⁴ See Rosario Ibarra, “Vivos Los Llevaron, Vivos Los Queremos,” *Fem*, no. 43 (December 1985): 46–48.

¹²⁵ State in the far southwest, home to a long tradition of radical activism, including the guerrilla groups of Lucio Cabañas and Genaro Vásquez.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 139.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

¹²⁸ See Jaime Pensado, *Rebel Mexico: Student Unrest and Authoritarian Political Culture During the Long Sixties*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013, for a discussion of the continuities between post-’68 domestic security policy and pre-’68 policy.

subversives,” political dissenters, and guerrilla opposition groups. But in Mexico there was no coup d’état, no military dictatorship. Assuming office on the heels of 1968’s unrest, President Luis Echeverría Álvarez publicly positioned his administration in contrast to that of his predecessor Gustavo Díaz Ordaz (1964–1970), especially with regard to the Left. Echeverría garnered the support of significant Left intellectuals, embarking on an “*apertura democrática*” (“democratic opening”). He acquiesced to certain demands of the ’68 student protestors and other opponents of Díaz Ordaz, such as freeing political prisoners, granting more autonomy to universities, and increasing education funding. Echeverría also offered government posts to leftist intellectuals, some of whom had participated in the student movement of ’68 and been imprisoned after or during it and now joined the PRI; diplomatically supported the international Latin American left (maintaining relations with Cuba and Chile’s Salvador Allende when the US did not) and *tercermundismo* (third-worldism), while also granting asylum to leftist political exiles from elsewhere in the region.¹²⁹

Mexico’s armed left did not fare as well during the democratic opening. While Echeverría made overtures to the academic and international left, including some groups of the *nueva ola*, he continued the PRI’s covert assault on the guerrilla left. Despite its remarkable political continuity and ostensible stability, Mexico shares in Latin America’s legacy of state terror and sociopolitical upheaval. Though to a lesser extent than in the Southern Cone and Central America, the 1960s through the early 1980s saw the proliferation of small, leftist urban and rural guerrilla groups in Mexico.¹³⁰ State counterinsurgency carried out by extralegal divisions of Mexico’s Dirección Federal de Seguridad (Federal Security Directorate, DFS) effectively eliminated the so-called “subversive threat” posed by these groups by the mid-1970s.

¹²⁹ Pensado, *Rebel Mexico*, 238.

¹³⁰ See for reference: Calderón, Fernando Herrera and Adela Cedillo, eds. *Challenging Authoritarianism in Mexico: Revolutionary Struggles and the Dirty War, 1964-1982*. New York: Routledge, 2012.

Quelling guerrillas' violent uprisings and small-scale attacks, the DFS detained, tortured, and killed hundreds of guerrilla organization members and suspected members, often "disappearing" them to covert detention centers, leaving no paper trail.¹³¹ Carey describes Echeverría's dual policies toward the left as the two mutually reinforcing dimensions of a single political program, as the PRI attempted to regain the political legitimacy lost in '68 while also imposing limits as to which sectors of the left belonged in the national political dialogue. She writes, "Under Echeverría, disappearances and state-sponsored torture became tools of control to ensure the democratic opening."¹³² The state terror side of what Carey refers to as Echeverría's "schizophrenic political machinations" aimed to eliminate the too-radical left from the political landscape, to facilitate an image of cooperation between the PRI and the Left that worked within the bounds of electoral politics and academia.¹³³

The guerrillas' activities indubitably were disruptive and violent, and intended to be so; several financed their operations with bank robberies and kidnappings of local public figures they saw as enemies of the underserved and underrepresented poor.¹³⁴ But they were never a match for counterinsurgency forces, which enjoyed all of the military, judicial, media, and bureaucratic resources of the state, allowing them to wipe out one guerrilla cell after another, scattering their members to clandestine prisons and unmarked mass graves.

National Motherhood, National Comité

¹³¹ Carey estimates the number killed during the Echeverría administration to be "at least 275 people, if not 1,500" (*Plaza of Sacrifices*, 142).

¹³² Carey, *Plaza of Sacrifices*, 174.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 168.

¹³⁴ Kate Doyle, "The Dawn of Mexico's Dirty War: Lucio Cabañas and the Party of the Poor," *Proceso - National Security Archive*, December 5, 2003, <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB105/index.htm>.

Comparative literature and performance studies scholar Diana Taylor's research on Argentina's Madres de Plaza de Mayo (Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo) offers applicable insights into the "motherist politics" mobilized by mothers of *desaparecidos* in nearly every Latin American country in the 1970s and 1980s.¹³⁵ The Mexican mothers of the disappeared, like the Madres de Plaza de Mayo, developed and pushed the boundaries of "the politics of motherhood," particularly with regard to state terror and nation. The Madres de Plaza de Mayo emerged almost simultaneously with the Comité in Monterrey, but have received far more scholarly attention. Protesting the forcible disappearance of their children during Argentina's 1976–1983 military dictatorship, a period of intense state terror, the Madres de Plaza de Mayo gathered weekly in the plaza outside of the presidential palace in Buenos Aires, wearing white handkerchiefs over their heads, marching silently, and carrying signs bearing photographs of their disappeared sons and daughters. Their activism was a powerful symbol of resistance against the dictatorship and its violent repression and silencing of opposition, and helped to decay the dictatorship's claims to legitimacy.

Taylor explains the mothers' protests in terms of motherhood's political complexity: "The Mothers worked within a double bind—'good' mothers were supposed to stay home, keep out of politics, and look after their children. But in a situation in which their children were being abducted, tortured and 'disappeared,' they couldn't be good (i.e., submissive) mothers and fulfill their maternal obligations."¹³⁶ The same holds true for their Mexican contemporaries, who also worked within the "double bind" of national, civic motherhood within the revolutionary family

¹³⁵ Taylor, ed. *The Politics of Motherhood: Activist Voices From Left to Right*, 143. Taylor's 1999 book *Disappearing Acts: Spectacles of Gender and Nationalism in Argentina's Dirty War* takes on the subject from the perspective of comparative literature, performance studies, and philosophy.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 141.

and the conflict it provoked with their maternal duties to their own children, whom the PRI had physically removed from their homes and from the revolutionary family.

By August 6, 1977, the families of Monterrey's political prisoners had solidified their links with their counterparts in other states, and the new national coalition of groups united as Mexico's first human rights NGO, the Comité Pro-Defensa de Presos Perseguidos, Desaparecidos y Exiliados Políticos de México (Committee for the Defense of Persecuted Prisoners, the Disappeared, and Political Exiles of Mexico, referred to henceforth as Comité).¹³⁷

The Comité's early work brought that of the local groups to a national scale. Individual members, primarily women, continued to press their municipal and state governments for information about their disappeared or imprisoned relatives, for the most part to no avail. Meanwhile, they worked collectively with the Comité to lobby the federal government in Mexico City, including the Ministry of the Interior and the office of the Attorney General, and frequently sought meetings with the president.¹³⁸

As the Comité's numbers grew, it became increasingly diverse.¹³⁹ Unlike the *nueva ola*, mothers of the disappeared mobilized from high and low economic strata, urban and rural areas in the north and south of the country, and were of an array of ethnicities.¹⁴⁰ This diversity corresponded with those affected by state terror campaigns. Women from the states of Oaxaca, Guerrero, and Michoacán (each has a large indigenous population) in the south joined, though some had trouble financing frequent trips to Mexico City and had to take up extra work, as did some from Nuevo León and Tamaulipas.¹⁴¹ Others joined from the capital, some seeking

¹³⁷ Welna, "Explaining Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs): Human Rights NGOs and Institutions of Justice in Mexico," 19.

¹³⁸ Lamas, "El Comité Nacional Pro-Defensa de Presos, Perseguidos y Exiliados Políticos," 66.

¹³⁹ Maier, *Las madres de los desaparecidos*, 139.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 140-144.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 184. For example, a member named Doña Elisa was "unable to continue [activism] because of economic issues." Translation by the author.

information about their children who had been detained for participation in student activism earlier in the decade. Though Ibarra came to represent the movement and, like many others in the Comité, was a housewife, she was not demographically representative: her family was quite well off, she had a high level of education and her marriage was one of equality.¹⁴² Like others in the movement, she became politicized and radicalized by her son's disappearance. Members of the Comité essentially took on their disappeared sons' and daughters' politics—thus aligning the Comité with the most radical Left, and even the parties that had rejected the 1970s *nueva ola*—sometimes explicitly, but also by virtue of demanding justice for dissidents removed from the protection of the revolutionary family. Ibarra summarized this relationship as such: “We gave birth to our children physically, but politically, they gave birth to us.”¹⁴³ Put another way, sociologist Elena Urrutia wrote in 1981 of the Comité, “Grief has transformed these women into political fighters.”¹⁴⁴

Ibarra was the public face of this fight, doggedly demanding information from government officials, nearly always fruitlessly. Even before the Comité's establishment, during the Echeverría administration, she repeatedly attempted to speak to the president. Famously, in 1976, on the final day of Echeverría's term, she managed to “ask the head of state if her son was at least alive. ‘I don't know, señora,’ was the dry response.”¹⁴⁵ Indeed, this response was reflective of officials' responses to the women's queries. A 1980 *Fem* article by Marta Acevedo, Marta Lamas, and Ana Luisa Liguori described these experiences:

At the beginning the women suffered sexism from the authorities. Especially those from the popular classes were systematically looked down upon and ridiculed. When they asked about their husband or son, they received responses of this sort: ‘Don't even look for him, he's left you for someone younger,’ ‘What

¹⁴² Ibarra, “Presentación,” in Maier, *Las madres de los desaparecidos*, 9-10.

¹⁴³ Ibarra, qtd. in Maier, *Las madres de los desaparecidos*, 187. Translation by the author.

¹⁴⁴ Urrutia, “La voz del silencio,” *Fem*, 97.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.* Translation by the author.

desaparecido? Surely he's left to be a *bracero*, 'Did you already look in the cantina?'¹⁴⁶

Along with illustrating the government's policy of categorically denying knowledge of politically motivated forcible disappearances, these responses indicate that PRI officials did not see the women of the Comité as legitimate political subjects. Entering the national political scene, speaking out against policies the PRI claimed it was not executing, the women contended with the dynamic Arizpe described in her 1978 *Fem* article,¹⁴⁷ the connection between the PRI's patriarchal authoritarianism and the authoritarianism they faced in their own homes.

For many, the nature of their marriage determined their level of participation in the Comité. Some enjoyed support from their husbands, or found that it increased over time, while others' husbands tried to keep them from becoming politically active, even with the object of finding their disappeared son or daughter.¹⁴⁸ As Ibarra recalled in a 1994 interview, though her own husband supported her activism,

many of us didn't have this 'freedom' because of our husbands' domination. It's sad but many fathers forbade their wives from going out on the streets to look for their children. There were some who had to choose between looking for their children and staying at home with their husbands.¹⁴⁹

When their husbands prevented them from joining the Comité, they reinforced the political authoritarianism that had led to their children's disappearance. On a personal level, this also confined the mothers to their idealized, apolitical role in the revolutionary family—but without their children. Paradoxically, in attempting to keep women in line with expected standards of behavior, authoritarian relationships within the nuclear family prevented some women from

¹⁴⁶ Acevedo et al., "México: una bolsita de cal por las que van de arena," 20.

¹⁴⁷ Arizpe, "Familia, desarrollo y autoritarismo."

¹⁴⁸ Maier, *Las madres de los desaparecidos*, 196.

¹⁴⁹ Ibarra, qtd. in Gaby Küppers, ed. *Compañeras: Voices from the Latin American Women's Movement*, London: Latin American Bureau, 1994, 18.

upholding their duty to the revolutionary family, to protect and foster their children as Mexican citizens. As Taylor writes, “‘National’ motherhood often pits a woman’s duty to her country against her personal obligations to her children.”¹⁵⁰ “National” motherhood aligns with the woman’s role as ideological, spiritual, and biological reproducer of the nation, directly tying to civic duty the private, familial processes of child-bearing and child-rearing. For the mothers in the Comité, the imprisonment or forcible disappearance of their children by the state created a conflict between their expected roles as mothers in the national revolutionary family and in their own immediate families.

1978: Hunger Strike and Amnesty

As Marta Lamas relates in a 1978 *Fem* article, the women of the Comité soon “exhausted all legal channels that the system allowed them,” making no headway on an amnesty law.¹⁵¹ In the summer of 1978, the Comité planned its first major public protest in Mexico City: a hunger strike in front of the Metropolitan Cathedral, beginning on August 28, until September 3 at the latest.¹⁵² The timing was strategic: Echeverría’s successor, José López Portillo (1976–1982) was set to deliver his second state of the union address on the first of September, and the Comité sought to urge the president to grant amnesty to all of Mexico’s 481 political prisoners.¹⁵³ The group included 83 women and four men.¹⁵⁴ Dressed in black for mourning, the protestors used the fence around the cathedral to hang posters with pictures of their sons and daughters, and signs reading “Los encontraremos” (“We will find them”).¹⁵⁵ A line of women held the letters

¹⁵⁰ Taylor, “Overview: Mothers and the State,” in Taylor, Orleck, Jetter, eds., *The Politics of Motherhood*, 141.

¹⁵¹ Lamas, “El Comité Nacional Pro-Defensa de Presos, Perseguidos y Exiliados Políticos,” 66.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 67.

¹⁵³ Poniawska, *Fuerte es el silencio*, 88. This is by the Comité’s count.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 84; Lamas, “El Comité Nacional,” 67. Apparently “one student spontaneously joined” the strike as well.

¹⁵⁵ Poniawska, *Fuerte es el silencio*, 80.

forming the phrase “Huelga de Hambre” (Hunger Strike). On the first day of the strike, the Comité resolved to maintain its encampment overnight, and remained until August 31.¹⁵⁶

The Cathedral is in the Zócalo, Mexico City’s central plaza, also home to the Palacio Nacional, which houses the executive branch of the federal government. Traditionally the site of patriotic ceremonies and national holidays, the Zócalo had not seen any large-scale protests since 1968 when thousands of students protested there and were met by tanks.¹⁵⁷ Political and social scientist César Gilabert describes the Zócalo as “the neurological point of monopolized ritual space...for the governments of the official party [the PRI].”¹⁵⁸ A decade before the Comité’s first hunger strike, the ’68 student protesters breached the Zócalo’s symbolic bounds, filling the square to bring their demands directly to the PRI’s “ritual space,” converting it into one of dissent. The Zócalo’s history as a contested physical site of PRI hegemony played into the Comité’s decision to hold its hunger strike at the cathedral, according to Ibarra. Although some from the party Left attempted to dissuade the group from staging a radical protest in a place of such nationalistic significance—quite literally under the watchful eye of the revolutionary family’s father-president—the Comité decided that the hunger strike’s strong statement outweighed the risks.¹⁵⁹ Furthermore, the fact that almost all of the protesters were women, many of them mothers—and were essentially publicly dramatizing a traditional ritual of women and mothers mourning lost family members—likely gave them a sense of security. Though the state had disappeared or imprisoned their relatives, who now were left outside the safety of the revolutionary family, the mothers enjoyed a level of immunity to the harsher mechanisms of PRI repression. Four days in, the Comité called off the hunger strike, in anticipation of López

¹⁵⁶ Lamas, “El Comité Nacional,” 67.

¹⁵⁷ Need to confirm that this is really accurate—it’s info from an interview in Maier.

¹⁵⁸ Gilabert, *El hábito de la utopía*, 204. Translation by the author.

¹⁵⁹ Ibarra de Piedra, qtd. in Maier, *Las madres de los desaparecidos*, 189.

Portillo's state of the union address the next day, not because members worried for their own safety, but "out of fear that there could be great repression...against the youth we were supporting."¹⁶⁰

However, the hunger strike seemingly produced the opposite result. López Portillo declared a general amnesty during his September 1 address, mentioning the "*madres enlutadas*" (mourning mothers) as part of his reasoning for doing so.¹⁶¹ Describing the political prisoners and *desaparecidos*—without using either of those terms or acknowledging that these "extreme dissidents," as he instead calls them, were victims of a decades-old apparatus of state terror and repression against the armed left—López Portillo said the children the mothers were searching for were "just like our own children."¹⁶² Here he employs a similarly exclusive "us" as appears on the Monument to the Mother, but distinguishes between the national "us" and the radical left instead of between women and the nation. Even if the PRI had already effectively deemed many of those detained and disappeared too "dissident" for inclusion in the revolutionary family, López Portillo—the father-president, head of the nation-family—referred to them as "youths," and "*hijos*" (sons or daughters¹⁶³), perhaps not yet full citizens, still capable of being molded for incorporation into the body politic.¹⁶⁴ But this is merely a rhetorical conceit: López Portillo and the PRI persisted in using language of inclusion, of family, while at the same time continuing to disappear them, physically eliminating them from the revolutionary family. As Ibarra de Piedra

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ López Portillo, José. "Segundo Informe de Gobierno Del Presidente José López Portillo," September 1, 1978. <http://www.diputados.gob.mx/sedia/sia/re/RE-ISS-09-06-15.pdf>. Translation by the autor.

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Ibarra, qtd. in Guitián, "Entrevista a Rosario Ibarra," 5, said about 10-15% of *desaparecidos* in Mexico were women.

¹⁶⁴ López Portillo, Segundo Informe Presidencial.

put it, “The Mexican government insists upon denying the *desaparecidos* [exist], but insists upon disappearing them.”¹⁶⁵

Although not all who had participated in the hunger strike were mothers, the Comité had already begun mobilizing traditional symbols of motherhood, legible to its most important audience, the head of the revolutionary family. The women dressed in black and staged the hunger strike, a symbolic act of suffering and self-sacrifice, against a twofold backdrop of the nation’s spiritual epicenter, both religious and patriotic. Beginning with the 1978 hunger strike, the mothers of the disappeared brought their private grief to the public sphere through political activism. But motherhood and maternal obligation to protect children was never truly divorced from the political, because the revolutionary family served as one of the organizing principles of the PRI’s political culture.

Although López Portillo’s public acknowledgement of the mothers’ activism and the imposition of an amnesty law were meaningful advances, the law had mixed effects. While, partially as a result of the Comité’s continued activism (and not immediately), about 2,000 political prisoners from around the country were released, fewer than ten of the 481 *desaparecidos* documented by the Comité reappeared, and only 33 of 57 political exiles were granted amnesty.¹⁶⁶ Although the Comité considered this a success, many members believed the law had not been sufficiently executed, and, led by mothers of *desaparecidos*, demanded that the government hold itself to account.¹⁶⁷

The amnesty law also caused a change in the Comité’s composition. As members’ relatives were released from jail, many left the group. Consequently, the Comité’s membership

¹⁶⁵ Ibarra, “Vivos los llevaron, vivos los queremos,” 47.

¹⁶⁶ Ibarra, qtd. in Maier, *Las madres de los desaparecidos*, 189; Lamas, “El Comité,” 67.

¹⁶⁷ Lamas, “El Comité,” 67.

narrowed to almost entirely mothers of the disappeared.¹⁶⁸ Most of the *desaparecidos* remained disappeared, and the Comité, in the absence of concrete evidence to the contrary, operated under the assumption that they were still alive. Between 1978 and 1981, the Comité carried out three more hunger strikes in Mexico City, one of which lasted fifteen days.¹⁶⁹

“A housewife for president?”

In the 1980s, the Comité’s national and international visibility increased. Forming coalitions with human rights NGOs around the country and in the capital, the Comité became a leader among in Mexico’s nascent human rights activist community.¹⁷⁰ Ibarra was an increasingly recognized and authoritative voice on the PRI’s dirty war, in part as a result of the Comité’s dramatic protests, but also because of her forays into national electoral politics. In 1982, and again in 1988, Ibarra unsuccessfully ran for president as the candidate for the Trotskyist Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores. In 1982 she received a small percentage of the votes, but the purpose was never really to win—and the PRI’s dominance over national elections precluded any real electoral opposition for the presidency, despite the electoral reform of 1977.¹⁷¹

Men from the entire political spectrum, including non-PRT men of the party Left, perceived Ibarra in 1982 as “a sentimental candidate,” asking incredulously, “A housewife for president?”¹⁷² Indeed, her run was largely for symbolic purposes, and the PRT, a small, radical

¹⁶⁸ Maier, *Las madres de los desaparecidos*, 192.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁰ The first of these was the Frente Nacional Contra la Represión (National Front Against Repression). According to Welna, “Explaining Non-Governmental Organizations,” 90, between 1983 and 1988 the annual rate of increase in the number of human rights NGOs in Mexico tripled, perhaps due to sharp falloff of state social spending with onset of neoliberal policies in 1982.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 65. The law increased congressional representation for opposition parties, and liberalized aspects of the campaign process.

¹⁷² Serna, “Rosario Ibarra: una mujer para presidenta,” 8.

leftist party, enjoyed no real chances of winning the presidency, no matter how “serious”—that is, male—its candidate had been. True, the Comité used the political currency of motherhood to make its protests emotionally and nationalistically compelling within the constraints of the revolutionary family. But the fact that Ibarra was perceived as “a housewife” when rather than a legitimate political actor speaks volumes about the political class’ conservatism toward women’s interventions into national political life. Although few men outside of the PRT or the human rights movement seem to have taken Ibarra’s candidacy seriously, some women, including those of the *nueva ola*, found Ibarra’s campaign symbolically important. A 1982 *Fem* article described it as one of the ways “we [women] have opened space for ourselves.”¹⁷³ The author speaks collectively of Ibarra’s candidacy, rhetorically integrating it into the “struggle for women’s liberation,” aligned with the goals of the 1970s *nueva ola*, and part of a continuing story that began in 1971 at the Monument of the Mother.¹⁷⁴

The 1982 race, and then her successful run for a seat in the Cámara de Diputados in 1985, raised Ibarra’s profile as the unofficial leader of the growing Mexican human rights movement, bringing attention to the mothers of the disappeared, and to ever-increasing dissatisfaction with the PRI’s political culture.¹⁷⁵ In 1981, the Comité joined with similar groups from Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay, to establish the Latin American Federation of Associations of Relatives of the Detained–Disappeared, the first transnational organization of its kind.¹⁷⁶ Throughout the decade, the Comité worked with Amnesty International, the UN, and the International Federation of Human Rights to continue the work it had begun in 1977, recording disappearances and politically motivated detentions, as well as attempting to track unresolved cases through

¹⁷³ Ibid., 4.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 8.

¹⁷⁵ Ibarra, qtd. in Maier, *Las madres de los desaparecidos*, 203.

¹⁷⁶ Ibarra, “Vivos los llevaron, vivos los queremos,” 47.

Mexico's judicial system.¹⁷⁷ In 1987, the group changed its name to Comité Eureka México to celebrate the *desaparecidos* found and the political prisoners released over the last decade, and to express hope for future successes.¹⁷⁸

Mother's Day 1989: Sacrifice in the Zócalo

In the group's optimistic name arises a tension with one of Comité Eureka's primary protest techniques: presenting themselves as mourning mothers. The mothers' activism, and the slogan "They were taken alive, we want them back alive," and the symbols and identities they employed, raise several questions: If their children were absent, most likely dead, were the women still owed the rights and privileges of the mother in the revolutionary family? And if they dressed in colors of mourning, became publicly and nationally identified as "mourning mothers," could they still demand the return of their children alive? Comité Eureka mobilized these contradictions in each of its protests—and increasingly so as ten, fifteen years passed since their children's disappearance—to at once exercise the moral authority of motherhood and the emotional appeal of the traditional grieving mother, while also politicizing the idealized apolitical mother of the PRI's revolutionary family.

On Mother's Day in 1989, Comité Eureka carried out its most dramatic protest to date. Bringing large wooden crucifixes into the Zócalo, outside the Presidential Palace, the mothers, dressed in black and blindfolded, simulated their own crucifixion.¹⁷⁹ With visually striking Christian symbolism of sacrifice, the mothers dramatized the role of the self-sacrificing mother even more vividly than in their hunger strikes. The protest can be read as the mothers putting themselves in their disappeared children's place, offering themselves up before the PRI's seat of

¹⁷⁷ Ibid. 48.

¹⁷⁸ Maier, *Las madres de los desaparecidos*, 17.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 59.

power as a powerful statement that the mothers had joined their children's political struggle, standing in for them in their absence. It is therefore an announcement of the mothers' radicalization, as they embodied their children's sacrifice (perhaps for their political cause) while turning traditional religious symbolism on its head, along with the PRI's traditional mother's day pageantry. Like the Coalición de Mujeres Feministas' march of "mourning women" in 1978, the Comité intervened into the celebratory, patriotic holiday with a scene of mourning for a group that had been removed from the revolutionary family. The protest also implied the announcement that women and mothers—in this case, the mothers who had captured national sympathy and imagination—would dictate how motherhood was to be celebrated and symbolized in Mexico from now on, and not the PRI.

Conclusion

Four decades after they began, the stories of Comité Eureka, the *nueva ola feminists*, and the ways in which they opened space for themselves and one another in the very real territory of the idealized institution of Mexican motherhood have not yet concluded. This thesis examines approximately the first decade of each of these stories, intervening in the existing historiography of women's movements in Mexico to unravel previously under-explored ties between the construct of motherhood in the PRI's "revolutionary family," *nueva ola* activism for "voluntary motherhood," and Comité Eureka's motherist politics. Surfacing during the Cold War, in the aftermath of '68 and in the midst of the state's dirty war against the armed left, the *nueva ola* feminists and the mothers of the disappeared used Mexico City's traditional spaces of nationalism, as well as new discursive spaces, to forge themselves as autonomous political actors.

Motherhood in Mexico's revolutionary family, as the *nueva ola* feminists and Comité Eureka experienced it, was a fraught intersection of the personal and the political. Their activism in itself challenged the gendered aspects of the PRI's hegemonic nationalism and authoritarian political culture. While the *nueva ola* feminists used the notion of motherhood as a point of contestation, Comité's members defined themselves by their motherhood in the absence of their disappeared children, demanding that the paternalistic state return their children.

Operating first within the nationalistic, political, physical, normative space of the PRI's revolutionary family and its attendant myths, the *nueva ola* feminists and the mothers of the disappeared carved out their own spaces within the existing architecture of celebratory nationalism, the Left, and Cold War politics. They made the Monument to the Mother and the Zócalo spaces of contestation; physically brought their demands related to motherhood—

voluntary and obligatory, at personal and national levels—to the halls of power; and created and shared discursive space in journals like *Fem*, exploring concrete and intellectual dimensions of authoritarianism, motherhood, and bridged the gap between feminist and non-feminist women's movements. The *nueva ola* feminists, in particular, came to view leftist women mobilizing in the 1970s and 1980s, including Comité Eureka, as partners within a larger, multifaceted scheme of women's liberation. This raises the question of what the *nueva ola* feminists and Comité Eureka sought liberation from. The answers are multiple, but all stem from the revolutionary family and the ultimate incompatibility of the narrow, idealized role of self-sacrificing, ever-fertile mother with the challenges, desires, and politics of women's lives.

The *nueva ola* feminists framed their initial activism as the goal of liberating themselves and other women from the “myth of the mother.” They soon transformed this into the demand for “voluntary motherhood,” a concept that carries implications of physical and reproductive liberty, and in the context of the revolutionary family, the right not be a biological and ideological reproducer of the nation or of the PRI.

The mothers of the disappeared did not present their challenge to the PRI as feminist or as an easily recognizable challenge to the revolutionary family. Rather, they worked from their own starting point: mothers struggling for liberation from the contradiction, brought about by state terror, between personal motherhood and “national” motherhood. Having already reproduced members of the children-citizenry, they demanded not that motherhood cease to be an obligation, but that it be an obligation that the PRI allow them to uphold, to their own children. Although López Portillo's rhetoric, for example, in his 1978 state of the union, gestures at an inclusive revolutionary family, the moment that state security forces disappeared their children, the revolutionary family left Comité Eureka's young, dissident child-citizens, outside

the boundaries, along with their mothers—who had, it seems, failed in their duty of ideological reproduction of the revolutionary family. The members of *Comité Eureka* politicized their motherhood, redefining their own roles in the revolutionary family with new agency to make explicitly political demands of the head of house.

Both the *nueva ola* and the mothers of the disappeared staged their challenges to the revolutionary family in public spaces in Mexico City that had historically been emblematic of the PRI's project of hegemonic revolutionary nationalism. Thus the *nueva ola* and *Comité Eureka* enlisted the Monument of the Mother and the *Zócalo*, each spaces in which the PRI's exclusive "us" celebrated itself and its myths, into the politics of reproduction and motherhood.

After the points at which my paper stops tracking the two movements, 1981 and 1989, respectively, each underwent certain changes in focus and structure. Each was part of the rise of NGOs, civil associations, and state agencies dealing with women's issues.¹⁸⁰ With the rise of neoliberal economic policies in Mexico, beginning full-force under President Miguel de la Madrid (1982–1988)—resulting in increased economic stratification and a decrease in social spending—women's groups and feminist groups took on broader social programs and took part in the strengthening and expansion of civil society where government fell short. They continued to demand that the state offer institutional remedies for women affected by violence and matters of reproductive health, which resulted in the establishment of several government agencies and programs in the 1990s.¹⁸¹

During the 1990s, the *nueva ola*'s activism for "voluntary motherhood" expanded into a broad movement for abortion rights.¹⁸² Marta Lamas remains a leading voice in the movement. In 2007, forty years after the *Coalición*'s first draft legislation on the matter and after a series of

¹⁸⁰ Millán, "Politics of Translation," 154.

¹⁸¹ Millán, "Politics of Translation," 155.

¹⁸² Lamas, "Un cambio de estrategia," *20 años por todas las mujeres*, 28-31.

early 2000s piecemeal laws, abortion within the first trimester of pregnancy became legal in Mexico City.¹⁸³ The capital also decriminalized termination of pregnancy after the first trimester, while abortion remains a crime in the rest of the country, except when the pregnancy is the result of rape (a poorly regulated and often difficult to prove stipulation).¹⁸⁴ Founded in 1992, Grupo de Información en Reproducción Elegida (Group for Information about Voluntary Reproduction, GIRE) “works for the defense and promotion of reproductive rights of women in Mexico,” with a focus on “access to legal and safe abortion.”¹⁸⁵ GIRE now celebrates May 10, in the legacy of the *nueva ola*’s focus on “voluntary motherhood,” as a “Day for a free and enjoyable motherhood with rights,” instead of the traditional Mother’s Day.¹⁸⁶

Comité Eureka continues its activism today. Like the *nueva ola*, the mothers of the disappeared took on more diverse issues of social justice during the 1990s. Elizabeth Maier writes that through its work relating to political dissidence, the Comité “discovered the theme of difference, whether political, cultural, gender or sexual preference.”¹⁸⁷ The number of human rights NGOs in Mexico, already on the rise in the 1980s, increased further in the 1990s, working with new human rights agencies in federal and state governments.¹⁸⁸

Particularly over the last several years, activism by mothers of the disappeared in Mexico has expanded. Comité Eureka is joined by mothers of those disappeared in the course of the militarized drug war under President Felipe Calderón (2006–2012), during whose term at least 26,000 people disappeared.¹⁸⁹ This is no longer anticommunism, but the collateral damage of a political narcostate. The disappearance of 43 *normalistas* (teachers college students) in Iguala,

¹⁸³ “Ciudad de México: Aborto,” <https://www.gire.org.mx/nuestros-temas/aborto>.

¹⁸⁴ “Aborto,” <https://www.gire.org.mx/nuestros-temas/aborto>.

¹⁸⁵ “Sobre GIRE,” Ibid. Translation by the author.

¹⁸⁶ Página principal, GIRE. <https://www.gire.org.mx/>

¹⁸⁷ Maier, *Las madres de los desaparecidos*, 191.

¹⁸⁸ Welna, “Explaining Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs),” 173-188.

¹⁸⁹ Greg Grandin, “This Mass Grave Isn’t the Mass Grave You Have Been Looking For.” *The Nation*, November 17, 2014, <http://www.thenation.com/blog/190721/mass-grave-isnt-mass-grave-you-have-been-looking>.

Guerrero, on September 26, 2014 has ignited a countrywide mobilization, drawing crowds of demonstrators to state capitals and the federal capital, animated by the same cry as Comité Eureka: “They were taken alive, we want them back alive.” In the first years of the PRI’s return to the presidency, the memory of the dirty war looms large; many protestors and historians see the continuities clearly, and have declared of the disappearance of the 43 students—and of the tens of thousands before them—“Fue el estado”: “It was the state.”¹⁹⁰ The mothers of the disappeared students have emerged as the symbolic leaders of the movement to protest the students’ disappearance and demand information about their case. On International Women’s Day, the mothers of the *desaparecidos* led a 2,000-person march in Mexico City, ending at the Monument of the Mother.¹⁹¹ The mothers of the students—on many occasions together with the fathers, in contrast to Comité Eureka’s activism—have led mass actions and publicized their campaign for justice for their children. In January, Macedonia Torres, the mother of one of the students, said in an interview, “we are going to keep fighting, until we find them, until the end,” evoking the symbolism and rhetoric of Comité Eureka.¹⁹² Considering the history of women’s activism on Mother’s Day since the 1970s, it is likely that the mothers of the disappeared *normalistas* will stage a protest in the capital on Mother’s Day this year.

Día de la Madre in Mexico has come a long way since 1922, when conservative alarm at the arrival of a pamphlet by Margaret Sanger in Yucatán catalyzed a push for the holiday as an occasion to invigorate national reverence for the institution of motherhood. Since then, the holiday, conceived of as a patriotic celebration of the revolutionary family, has served as an

¹⁹⁰ John Gibler, “The Disappeared.” *The California Sunday Magazine*, <https://stories.californiasunday.com/2015-01-04/mexico-the-disappeared-en/>.

¹⁹¹ “Acaba marcha por Día de la Mujer con madres de los 43,” *Lacronica.com*, March 9, 2015, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1661458979?pq-origsite=summon&accountid=10226>

¹⁹² “Vamos a seguir luchando hasta encontrarlos: padres de los 43,” *Milenio*, January 26, 2015, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1648119766?pq-origsite=summon&accountid=10226>. Translation by the author.

occasion for women activists to contest that original purpose. It continues to be so. Mother's Day in recent years has seen protests by mothers of the drug war's disappeared and rallies for abortion rights. Women in Mexico now mark Día de la Madre each year in ways that surely would have shocked the early post-Revolution proponents of the revolutionary family. A day of resistance, of celebration, of motherhood on the woman's own terms, Día de la Madre owes its new history in large part to the work of the *nueva ola* feminists and the mothers of the disappeared.

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