

Argentina

# THE FEMINIST PEOPLE

PHOTO: MARIANA TERRILE

National and transnational articulations.  
The case of Argentina.

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Feminisms are at the forefront of the democratic struggles in many countries, depending on their history and context. In Argentina the political momentum promoted by the debate over the abortion law motivated more than a million women, lesbians, transgender people and men to go onto the streets. Although the Senate rejected the abortion bill after it had been approved by the Chamber of Deputies, the political and cultural change goes beyond this.

The purpose of this article is to analyze the processes followed by feminisms in Argentina, the demands and articulations that emerged and opened the possibility of a historical momentum in which these are at the center of the political scene. My long-standing research seeks the existence – or not – of the articulations of identities that would embody the construction of counter-hegemonies based on demands around the expansion of rights, which allows the linking of the struggle of feminist movements with others. I particularly consider the period inaugurated in the new millennium in Argentina, which was characterized as a “battlefield” between neoliberal and populist discourses. When I refer to populism, I take into account that this category has the meaning of we – the subordinated – confronting the others, those that hegemonically dominate. In this confrontation, a “people” can contingently emerge. Following Ernesto Laclau<sup>1</sup> and Jacques Rancière,<sup>2</sup> there is a people when the plebs – subaltern groups – articulate their claims to be included in the democratic count.

IN RECENT YEARS, many European and US scholars have considered populism solely as rightist, against migration, racist and xenophobic, etc. Also, when theorists that study illiberalism<sup>3</sup> associate it with one type of populism (right-wing)<sup>4</sup> it seems as if the experiences in some Latin American countries with left-wing populist regimes are not taken into account; for example, the processes in Brazil (2002–2016) and in Argentina (2003–2015). In these left-wing populisms there was progress in economic, social and cultural rights. However, this process was incomplete, due to historical structural factors and the results of the implementation of neoliberal policies since the 1990s in these countries. In general, both in Brazil and in Argentina the role of the state was held in higher appreciation and structural reforms were carried out to change neoliberal policies. This was accomplished together with popular representation and the deepening of democratic institutions in three key dimensions: a) political: full functioning of democratic institutions and republican division of state powers, activating collective actors, widening democratic citizenship; b) economic: towards redistribution and supervision and control of the economy carried out by the state; c) human rights recognition (gender, sex, race, ethnicity, etc.). Beyond differences between the countries, emphasis was placed on both on

the struggle against social exclusion, the search for social justice, the effective exercise of democratic institutions and respect for human rights.

This is particularly important for this investigation, since more sexual, political, economic and cultural advances, included in the broad framework of human rights, can be attributed in Argentina to the left populist stage. However, the key question of the abortion law was not enabled to come before the national Congress until 2018. The feminist movement has brought the struggle regarding abortion legalization into the public arena and the phase of it being addressed has been reached. It was approved by the Chamber of Deputies; however, as I already mentioned, it did not pass the Senate. This fact manifested the interference of conservative forces, in particular the Catholic Church and some evangelical churches, in matters related to the rights of women, lesbians and transgender people.

THE LEGALIZATION OF ABORTION is set in the framework of sexuality as a political issue, considering the widening of sexual citizenship for women, lesbian and transgender people, in the same way as happened in the case of the egalitarian marriage (2010)

and the gender identity laws (2012).<sup>5</sup>

It proclaims the questioning of the patriarchal order that links sexuality to procreation and intends to control women’s, lesbians’ and transgender people’s bodies. It is set in a human rights and public policy approach, therefore severed from individual civil servants’ religious beliefs. This shows the relevance of deepening the secular state, that like democracy can always be widened and perfected. It should guarantee women, lesbians and transgender people the ability to take decisions over their bodies and freely pursue their own life projects.

**“WHEN I REFER TO POPULISM, I TAKE INTO ACCOUNT THAT THIS CATEGORY HAS THE MEANING OF WE – THE SUBORDINATED – CONFRONTING THE OTHERS, THOSE THAT HEGEMONICALLY DOMINATE.”**

Enabling the legalization of abortion to be addressed is the product of the women’s and feminists’ movement’s history. This struggle has not started recently; in fact it dates back to thirty-five years ago, almost the same number of years since the democratization process started in Argentina in 1983 and developing along with it. The legalization of abortion has been discussed collectively for more than fourteen years and the project has been submitted to the National Congress seven times. Many scholars who pursue an intense and long-standing feminist activism consider it necessary to “regain our genealogies, remember and build up on our own history”.

I agree with Claudia Anzorena<sup>6</sup> and María Florencia Alcaraz et al.<sup>7</sup> that the key to understanding what goes on in women’s, lesbian and transgender movements is in the Encuentros Nacionales de Mujeres – ENM (*National Women Meetings – NWM*), the most important demonstrations of women’s and sexualities activism in Argentina.

Therefore I choose to approach the analysis of the Argentin-

ian women's movement by presenting the main characteristics of the National Women Meetings, NWM, as these are the core of feminist expansion and articulation points. Those meetings started in 1986, initiated by a group of Argentinian feminist women that had participated in the Women's Third International Conference in Nairobi organized by the United Nations (1985). The NWM are anti-patriarchal, anti-neoliberal, autonomous, horizontal, self-summoned, pluralist, massive, and non-institutionalized. The National Women Meetings are held once a year in a province chosen by the participants and organized by an ad hoc commission.

The core of the NWM organization are thematic workshops, faithful to the horizontality of the movement, since they enable reflection and debate while at the same time facilitating the creation of networks. They cover a wide variety of problematic issues: contraception, abortion, living conditions, health, education, unemployment, consequences of neoliberalism, external indebtedness and adjustment, which were always denounced in the NWM.

From 1997 women from the incipient organizations of unemployed workers and others that were part of various organizations that emerged in the protests and pickets around 1995 began to appear at the NWM. These women denounced the hardships they were going through.<sup>8</sup>

Since that time, conservative Catholic sectors have increasingly tried to boycott them. We can include these sectors in the denomination of an integral Catholic approach that is based on and at the same time reinforces patriarchy, in its defense of sexuality subject to procreation, of traditional motherhood as the basis of female identity, and of denial of the different ways of living sexuality.<sup>9</sup>

In the NWM held in the Province of Salta in 2002, the presence of female picketers (piqueteras), assembly members, trade unionists, and militants of various women's movements, of different ages (with a significant presence of young people), showed the consolidation of new expressions of women's activism, the carriers of new struggles. In 2003, the Meeting held in Rosario (Province of Santa Fe) marked the turning point in the NWM that had already been announced in Salta. The attendance of 12,000 women showed that more and more were activists of social movements, piqueteras, workers from "recovered" factories, indigenous and peasant women. Rights related to sexual and reproductive health were among the most frequently demanded. Like other times, one of the branches (called "Founding Line") of the Madres de Plaza de Mayo (*Mothers of Plaza de Mayo*) was present, and the use of green handkerchiefs to symbolize the struggle in favor of the legalization of abortion was inspired by their white handkerchiefs.

**THE IMPACT** of the movements on women was immense, and it became the impetus for them to begin claiming their rights. Added to the Catholic call to boycott the meeting, it is the basis for the radicalization of the fight to legalize abortion, one of the three fundamental rights they demanded, together with the claims linked to violence against women and unemployment.

In the NWM in the province of Mendoza (2004), the final march drew twenty thousand women. The convergence of a great diversity of women from different origins (rural, indigenous, urban, poor and middle class, employed or unemployed, feminists), was accentuated. The position presented was in favor of the legalization of and free access to abortion and contraceptive methods, and to the incorporation of sex education in the educational system. In relation to labor rights, equal treatment was demanded for women and men, the reduction of women's retirement age and the enactment of common laws for the whole country in this regard. Active policies to protect women against violence in the private and labor sphere were also demanded. The National Campaign for Safe, Legal and Free Abortion, the first campaign of federal scope in Argentina, emerged from the workshops on decriminalization strategies. In the following NWMs, the participation of women from different movements increased, various organizations and networks were organized, and links with feminists were accentuated.

**IN 2015**, the collective *Ni Una Menos* (literally meaning *Not One Less*, standing for *Not One Woman Less*) emerged. In March 2018, the Executive Branch enabled the treatment of the Campaign's abortion legalization project. Participation in the NWM grew from two thousand women at the first meeting, to reach around two hundred thousand at that held in October 2019.

From the 33<sup>rd</sup> NWM held in 2018 in Trelew (Province of Chubut), the claim arose for the adoption of a name that, in addition to referring to women, makes visible both their plurinational character, and lesbian, transvestite, transgender, bisexual and non-binary identities. In October 2019, on the last day of the 34<sup>th</sup> Meeting, held in La Plata, (Province of Buenos Aires), the title *Encuentro Plurinacional de Mujeres, Lesbianas, Bisexuales, Trans, Travesties, Intersex y No Binaries* (*Plurinational Meeting of women, lesbians, bisexuals, transvestites, and transgender, intersex and non-binary people*) was voted by acclamation.<sup>10</sup> Zulema Enriquez, Quechua, journalist and teacher said at the meeting: "The meeting is no longer national and 'of women', the meeting is plurinational, and of women, lesbians, transvestites, and transgender, bisexual and non-binary people; this touches me on a personal level because it talks about my identity, because it names me".<sup>11</sup>

The process I have described shows the emergence and articulation of new feminist demands and identities in Argentina. In this essay I will refer firstly to the notion of "feminist people" that I have been developing since 2009,<sup>12</sup> following Laclau's theory of populism.<sup>13</sup> This people, in its struggle for the approval of the abortion law, antagonized Catholic fundamentalism and its conservative allies, with demands focused on strengthening secularism and democracy. Secondly, I will present the feminist practices developed over the third millennium; thirdly, the contingent possibilities opened by the emergence of the *Ni Una Menos*. Finally, I will briefly develop the previous discussion into a broader one, that is, on discourses on democracy (especially illiberal, populist and neoliberal discourses and their effects on gender and sexuality rights).<sup>14</sup>



## The feminist people

Women's demands, participation in the movements and in the NWMs as well as the Catholic Church's strategies since 1997 to boycott them have contributed to favor the emergence of new feminist identities and radicalization of feminist movements, processes that have been intensifying throughout these years. New political articulations have created a momentum of displacement, antagonism and redefinition since the 2001 crisis, paving the way for the emergence of a political identity, the "feminist people", in which women's and feminist movements constitute a core. This historical situation rendered this political identity that is the result of the articulation of several struggles for the broadening of rights and for the consolidation of a pluralist democracy. I have stated that: "two antagonistic projects were confronting each other, one as a field of struggle and of democratic opportunities – being on the offensive –; and the other, that resists consolidation of new rights, being on the counter-offensive".<sup>15</sup>

This confrontation was intensified in 2018 when the abortion law was addressed in the National Congress between April and August 2018, in the invited key speakers' presentations in front of the committees in both the chambers of deputies and senators. As a consequence, a new call for collective apostasy in several parts of the country was organized and became more massive when the Senate rejected the bill to legalize abortion.<sup>16</sup>

The articulation of each collective group's concern with that of others can trigger the radicalization of the claims for the broadening of rights. These groups may find themselves in equivalent positions upon challenging the existing hegemony and as a consequence, create a people – an antagonistic formation – as the result of unifying various demands in a stable signifying system that allows equivalence consolidation<sup>17</sup> I called this a "feminist people". It is a contingent political construction and not a sociological entity.<sup>18</sup>

Laclau<sup>19</sup> refers to the hegemonic construction when a par-

ticular demand takes on a universal representation that is always impossible and incommensurable. These people, quoting Rancière:<sup>20</sup>

"... is the 'part of those who have no part' [...] "Politics occurs by reason of a single universal that takes the specific shape of wrong. Wrong institutes a singular universal, a polemical universal, by tying the presentation of equality, as the part of those who have no part, to the conflict between parts of society".

When I refer to the "feminist people" I mean the articulation of the part of those who have no part, the ones that are aware of the wrong (injuries).<sup>21</sup> It is not about sociological or demographic characteristics, but about the "plebs" that articulate demands in the face of a perceived wrong, that claim to be a people. This brings us to what Rancière refers to as a dispute about who is understood to be in the democracy contingent and not predetermined count, which is the "feminist people's" central point.

I would like to highlight two points: Firstly, I depart from a feminist approach, using as a basis the theoretical framework developed by Laclau, mentioned above, in a way that has only recently been used to analyze the populist momentum in which feminists and other movements, actors from trade unions and political parties articulate their demands regarding legal abortion, women's rights, laicism and in doing so, oppose patriarchy as well as neoliberalism.<sup>22</sup> For a feminist analysis the notions of "heterogeneity" and the "establishment of an antagonistic frontier" developed by Laclau are clarifying:

[...] it is not a denied element that defines identity, nor is it a binary opposition, it is an external element that presupposes the absence of a common space [...] "All we know is that it is going to be the ones outside the system, the marginal ones – the ones we have called

the heterogeneous – that are decisive in establishing an antagonistic border.”<sup>23</sup>

He also refers to the fact that the heterogeneous is never a pure exteriority because it inhabits the very logic of the internal constitution.<sup>24</sup> Women’s/sexual identities are not the binary opposite of the male category, nor its complement;<sup>25</sup> they are the heterogeneous, the Other in the patriarchy. Secondly, I differ from Laclau’s assertion that counter-hegemonic politics needs a leader. For him,<sup>26</sup> the unity of the group takes place in the name of the leader, key to the affective investment [cathexis] that is basic to constructing politics. In my analysis I cannot affirm that it is always the name of the leader that represents the chain of equivalence, since the conformation of the “feminist people” is horizontal, having situational referents, not authorities. The very names of the movements and/or their symbols have the potential for generating the cathexis that unifies the demands. In the case I am studying these were articulated in the chain of equivalence and favored the emergence of diverse, pluralistic and democratic collective identities, generated from multiple locations. They have their foundation in the women’s movement’s horizontal and rhizomatous structure, their networks and their local, transnational, face to face and cyber space articulations. Feminisms do not have leaders or owners, they follow neither a canonical feministic conception, nor the gender mainstreaming mandates of international organizations. On the contrary, they have the autonomy and political capability to choose their struggles, their timing, and their strategies in order to carry them out. The “feminist people” nucleus is made up of women, lesbians, gays, transvestites, transsexual and intersexual people, in their struggle towards full citizenship.<sup>27</sup>

One might wonder whether not having a leader is an obstacle to the constitution of the feminist people. I do not think so. Laclau himself presents a range of alternatives offered by Freud, when transcribing an extensive quotation by the latter, in which he wonders if the leader can be replaced by something different: a shared trend, a desire that a crowd could participate in.<sup>28</sup> Also, when referring to the new internationalism and the possibility of creating chains of equivalences through a common language, he reflects on the obsolescence of traditional institutional forms of political mediation.<sup>29</sup>

The “feminist people” is an identity that includes feminisms and other subordinate collectives, since it comprises an articulation through a process that builds it. It confronts traditional sectors, through the demand for the separation between sexuality and procreation, between church and state, since the demand for the legalization of abortion is an empty signifier of full citizenship: That is sexual citizenship, but also economic, and cultural. This demand for secularism and pluralism builds a frontier and confronts the patriarchal discourses hegemonically

represented by the conservative Catholic Church and allies from some evangelical churches.

To sum up, the “feminist people” is a counter-hegemonic articulation that includes all kind of feminist identities and demands. The distinction exists among historical middle-class feminists, working class people, aboriginals, afro-descendants, LGBTTIQ, migrants, peasants, persons with disabilities, youth, adults, males, but right now they do not delimit rigid compartments. The theory of intersectionality is of course needed to acknowledge the complexity of identities and to attain political visibility. Nevertheless these identities are not essentialist, or fixed, but on the contrary they are in constant mutation and conflict.

## Feminist practices

For almost 30 years now, feminist practices have spread horizontally to other actors, movements and spaces in society, which can be framed in the notion of horizontal feminism flows defined as *sidestreaming feminism*.<sup>30</sup> Multiple feminist interventions, workshops and publications have spread in a great range of organizations and territories.

The “feminist people” is widening the heat of the struggles day by day, including new movements, organizations and groups. For example, since 2010, the “Colectivo Varones Antipatriarcales. Ni machos ni fachos” (“*Anti-patriarchal Male Collective. Neither Machos, nor Fascist*”) linked to the piqueteros organization Darío Santillán Front (FDS), has activated a statement: “*Varones por el derecho al aborto legal, seguro y libre*” (“Males for the right to legal, safe and free abortion”).<sup>31</sup> Some years ago, LGBTTIQ identities were debating about who made up the feminist subject, that is to say whether heterosexual women should be the sole subject of the legal abortion struggle or if this should be extended to all people capable of pregnancy (lesbian and transgender people), which has also

in turn led to widening the vocabulary so as to include all bodies able to get pregnant.

From a multiplicity of territories and geographies, that are in turn global and local, a contingent articulation of anti-patriarchal and anti-neoliberal demands has been generated in a horizontal way with creativity, rebellion and boldness in a learning process at NWM throughout more than 30 years, in the collective actions that have a transnational outreach dating back a long time, in Ni Una Menos-mobilizations, that I will discuss next. In the streets and in the assemblies, the bodies and the voices become intertwined and connected in an intense way, the “feminist people” make statements, confront, negotiate and decide in equality, beside gender mainstreaming or any other leadership that may wish to head the process.

The collective identity also criticizes neoliberal paradigms and policies. It denounces the agreement of the prior government – whose term concluded in December 2019 – with the In-

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ternational Monetary Fund (IMF), and the neoliberal discourses on work, social reproduction, care, etc., in the context of this stage of capitalism's virulence. In 2017 the Feminist Forum against the World Trade Organization (WTO) was organized in Buenos Aires, as also was the Feminist Forum against the G20 summit in 2018. In addition, there is an increase in organizations studying feminist economy.

## Ni una menos

In 2015 the collective Ni Una Menos emerged from the initiative of a group of journalists, writers and researchers that used to get together to reflect upon feminisms and the cultural field, through a cycle of readings at the National Library. They initiated a demonstration in front of the National Congress to report the emergency situation of femicides in Argentina. Their strategies attained a national presence: first and foremost, but not exclusively, aimed at gaining visibility, reporting and holding the state and society responsible for violence against women. The demands were stated in five points: the implementation of the National Action Plan that must foresee the fulfillment of the Integral Protection Law to Prevent, Sanction and Eradicate Violence Against Women; establishing guarantees to the victims' access to justice; the conformation of a unique official register of violence against women victims; to deepen integral sexual education's programs and activities at all educational levels all around the country; to guarantee protection for victims of violence.

This first demonstration was followed by others in subsequent years, just as massive, making claims against gender violence and femicides, male chauvinistic justice, unemployment, and poverty affecting women, especially the youngest. The demand for legal abortion was also presented. In 2016, demonstrations were held both in Peru and Mexico. In the latter, the motto was: "Vivas Nos Queremos" (*We want Ourselves Alive*), that was also incorporated in Argentina. Likewise, 17 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean joined in October 19, 2016 the Women's National Strike against femicides with the mottos:

"#NosotrasParamos" (#WeStrike),  
"#NiUnaMenos" (#NotOne  
Less), "#VivasNosQueremos" (#WeWantO  
urselvesAlive).

It was also called "#MiércolesNegro" (#BlackWednesday), echoing the name from the Black Monday that Polish women had carried out few days before.<sup>32</sup>

**WHEN ANALYZING** the above-mentioned Polish women's mobilization, Jenny Gunnarson Payne<sup>33</sup> asserts that when they referred to the government's intentions of prohibiting abortion, they built up a discursive frontier between "us" (women, girls and their allies) and the enemy (the government, the Catholic Church). Reflecting upon this, she wonders: "Can women be 'the people'?" As already mentioned in the Argentinian case, she emphasizes the extension of demands, and the Czarny Protest's "we feminist"

articulation and the extension of the common "we" as well as the common "enemy", through the special space and temporal articulations of feminist struggles. Her analysis concludes with the expression "the women as 'the people'", thus approaching "the feminist people" notion from another context.

On November 25, 2016 many demonstrations were carried out in at least 138 cities in Argentina, as well as in Chile, Mexico, Uruguay, Bolivia, Honduras, Guatemala, Peru, Ecuador, El Salvador and the United States. There were also events in Spain and France. The actions developed during 2015 and 2016 paved the way for the Women's International Strike "#NosotrasParamos" (#WeStrike), on Women's International Day, March 8, 2017, organized through coordination between feminist organizations from several continents. The strike and the march towards Plaza de Mayo in the city of Buenos Aires, called to focus on economic and political inequality, male chauvinistic and femicide violence against women, were massive. In February 2018, a demonstration in front of the National Congress, carrying and raising green handkerchiefs (*pañuelos*), that are the symbol of the National Campaign for Safe, Legal and Free Abortion (called *pañuelazo*), took place followed by the Women's International Day demonstration on March 8, 2018, and many activities against criminalization and for legalization of abortion.

The Ni Una Menos slogans against sexual abuse, violence and femicides spread all over the country and had a great impact in the state, on political parties of very different orientations, social movements, unions, religious organizations etc. The images that identify Ni Una Menos could be seen in official spaces, stores and even in few Catholic parishes. The conservative sectors did not speak out against Ni Una Menos' focal topics and demonstrations. Instead, they were very critical of the NWM and feminist activism, as in the case of the demonstrations and rallies in 2017 and 2018.

## "NEW ACTORS – TEENAGERS AND YOUNG PEOPLE – ARE GOING OUT ONTO THE STREETS AND CARRYING OUT ACTIVISM THROUGH SOCIAL NETWORKS."

Ni Una Menos could have become feminist or patriarchal, since from the outset it was made up of different groups and identities that were not homogenous. On the one hand, on the side of patriarchal discourses, horror at femicide brutality, reports against violent men, and public policy demands were observed. Yet on the other hand, in many cases, there was neither criticism of unequal gender and sex relationships, nor regarding the Catholic Church, nor demands to deepen the secular state, while other aspects

included ignorance or rejection of lesbians and transgender people, rejection of abortion legalization, and lack of consideration regarding the violence, ill treatment, humiliation and disrespect suffered by many women that decide to have an abortion, and the health risk they face when they do not have the resources to undergo the procedure safely.

I consider that when the Ni Una Menos demand emerged, it was a "floating signifier".<sup>34</sup> This means that it found itself be-

ing pulled by very different chains of equivalence (put simply: traditional and antipatriarchal), as well as there is a permanent frontier shifting. The claims against multiple forms of violence against women are addressed towards institutions and can be differentially satisfied (taking each demand separately). Laclau<sup>35</sup> considers that, when the system faces demands, it can absorb them differentially. They are affirmations of particularisms and are isolated from other demands. If they are satisfied as particular demands (absorbed, administered, and colonized by the State), they are inscribed in the hegemonic institutional logic of the difference. When the demands escape from the hegemonic discourses and are articulated, a momentum of popular demands may appear. They can enter into an equivalence relationship by challenging the hegemonic formation and, therefore, building a people.<sup>36</sup> In this sense, at the beginning, I pondered that this emergent social action could not be counter-hegemonic, as is the abortion demand. However, once this was acknowledged to be a floating signifier, the contingency of its inscription in some equivalence chain became clear. This was possible, since it depended on its capacity of enrolling itself in anti-patriarchal equivalences.

### A new articulating momentum

To build up “a people”, the mere aggregation of demands is not sufficient. Articulation of those demands is required, if the goal is to build a counter-hegemonic politics to oppose the patriarchal domination approach. As time went by, most of Ni Una Menos’ claims built themselves into a feminist discourse, and teenagers and youth especially, embraced the struggle for the legalization of abortion, as was observed during the demonstration on March 8, 2017, when discourses burgeoned in many spaces. Different generations, sexualities, territories, and ethnic groups voiced demands for sexual rights as well as for human rights that were being increasingly threatened, and against the economic decline that was leading to factories closing down and lay-offs.

**NEW ACTORS** – teenagers and youth – are going out into the streets and carrying out activism through social networks. They identify themselves by the green handkerchief that has been waving since the NWM in Rosario in 2003, when many of them had just been born. Their entrance into the public space shows how appearance builds momentum, to quote Arendt.<sup>37</sup> This was particularly visible at “the Pañuelazo” on February 19, 2018, and the huge green-tinted demonstration on March 8, 2018, as already mentioned. They became visible and demanded the recognition of their right to decide about their own sexualities, emotions and bodies. This conception builds on the demand to acknowledge sexuality as not necessarily and solely linked to reproduction; that is to say, to any essentialist approach to its purpose. Sexual rights regulations are ideologically based on the conception of woman-as-mother and of a feminine sexuality at the service of reproduction, not for pleasure. Generally, as we witnessed during the debates on abortion law, the groups that oppose sexual rights are motivated by patriarchal ideology, whichever reasoning they may submit, and their purpose is to

control and tame women and bodies able to get pregnant, in their terms. They become more merciless with the bodies, emotions and decisions of poor women, wanting to patronize them with the excuse of taking care of their lives and those of the fetus, with the motto: “*save the two lives*”.

### Illiberal governments and rights

The government of Mauricio Macri (2015–2019) faced protests of all kind because the imposition of neoliberal policies prompted economic recession, record inflation, unemployment and impoverishment. In this context, after the demonstration mentioned above, the president of Argentina considered the feminist’s claims in the streets and enabled the bill to legalize abortion to be put before Congress. This response from the government is similar to the responses in 2018 to Ni Una Menos demonstrations, for example appointing a feminist to be in charge of the National Women’s Institute; launching the second National Action Plan for Prevention, Assistance and Eradication of Violence against Women; opening new centers for women’s assistance in various provinces, etc. We can consider these actions as “*dispositifs*”,<sup>38</sup> whose emergence responds to a particular historic landmark that makes it necessary to establish the conditions of their appearance as events that modify a previous field of power relationships. As on some other occasions, the *dispositifs* spring from the heat of claims.

Some authors point to the danger that women’s rights and those of other sexual identities might become part of simulated changes (*gatopardists*). In other words, one of the threats to reaching gender equality is the degree to which these rights can be a “commitment” element in the males’, governments’ and corporations’ agenda.<sup>39</sup> However, as I have already stated, the treatment by the Argentine Congress of the bill to legalize abortion is due to a robust feminist movement, to a project debated on and agreed for years, to a massive and permanent mobilization and to the number of young people in the demonstration on the streets that made them visible in the public arena. If we consider that taking to the streets in demonstrations and activism in different spaces have a transforming potential, there were contingent identity displacement processes in the discourses on bodies, compulsory heterosexuality, maternity, and families. These processes led to the radicalization of the demand in the struggle against the patriarchy and the traditional forces that support it, not only regarding sexual rights but also cultural, religious, political and economic rights.

**ENABLING THE BILL** to come before congress is a good example of how a government that has ruled the country since 2015 (until December 2019) adjusted itself to the feminists’ demand on the streets. This government can be branded as illiberal (see Zakaria; Smith and Ziegler; Galston; Graff and Korolczuk; Peto and Grzebalska; Moghadam; Gates; Wilkin; Arnold),<sup>40</sup> because of the following characteristics: the constitutional division of powers was not respected; human rights violations were denied and human rights organizations denigrated; also, pre-trial detention of popular activists and former civil servants occurred, authorization

was given to the police and *gendarmérie* (border patrol force) to kill presumed suspects of crimes and they were congratulated for doing so, and the government intended to give to the military an internal security role, taking the fight against drug trafficking as an excuse. At the same time it dismantled the rights structure that had been historically achieved, such as social security, educational, and health systems, as well as redistributive policies from the previous progresist populist administration that governed between 2003–2015 and won the elections in October, 2019. Currently the present administration is working hard to revert these devastating politics. They base their politics on the defense, protection, and promotion of human rights, recognition of gender and diversity equality with institutional reforms and active public policies. An example of this is the restitution of the Ministries of Health and of Labour, which were degraded in the prior administration and the creation of a new Minister of Women, Gender and Diversity, among other policies.

We can compare some of these characteristics with other illiberal regimes, such as those in Hungary and Poland. In both, the governments act against women's rights, for example, with the full prohibition of abortion. Andrea Peto and Weronika Grzebalska<sup>41</sup> have coined a provocative term, the “polypore state”, to refer to the illiberal regimes that have made themselves at home in those democracies, already weakened by various factors (financial crisis, insecurity and migration, for example). The authors criticize the way the content and resources of democratic institutions are used in those countries in favor of right-wing organizations' projects, as was happening in Argentina. Other authors, such as Agnieszka Graff and Elżbieta Korolczuk<sup>42</sup> call this populism, meaning right-wing populism. In those countries, conservatives forces (especially Catholic bodies), link their rejection of global capital and free market institutions to the rejection of women's rights and those of LGBTTIQ identities. Some Latin American countries show more varied situations, e.g. the alliance between Catholics and evangelicals as can be seen in Brazil, Chile and Argentina. In our country, dissatisfaction about the economy was used to reinforce religious arguments in the debate about the legalization of abortion, considering that it is part of the agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), as a policy of demographic control. The above-mentioned authors regard both the Polish and Hungarian governments as anti-globalization and anti-gender. Argentina's government (2015 to 2019) was pro-globalization and pro-market, and criticized the human rights system and its organizations. Notwithstanding, it had to give some ground to fulfil women's human rights, due to the feminist demonstrations that were primarily for sexual rights (legal abortion, against violence against women, lesbian and transgender people), economic and labor rights. These concerns promoted by the national government were not present in the agenda of the administration of the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires, which is governed since 2007 by the same political party. For example, there were neither active and concrete measures to prevent violence against women and assist those affected, nor was the Integral Sexual Education Law (2008) fully implemented throughout the educational system, nor was the Non Punishable

Abortion Protocol (2012) implemented, after the Supreme Court of Justice of the Nation ruled that “every woman who is pregnant as a result of a rape has the right to access a non-punishable abortion regardless of their intellectual capacity, without requiring prior judicial authorization to access the practice [ . . . ]”<sup>43</sup>

The situation in various Latin-American countries in which policies that can be considered as left-wing populist, even to a limited extent, were changed by neoliberal governments, alerts us to the risks that these have faced in a globalized context in which the hegemonic forces of capitalism are acting with ferocity to take those paths back. It is also occurring with the expansion of right-wing populisms in several countries in the global north and south.

## Final reflections

Currently, the debate about the legalization of abortion has expanded the “feminist people” to a previously unthinkable extent; it established the legalization of abortion in public opinion and promoted the demand to deepen the separation between the church and the state. The “feminist people” is a new identity that broadens itself with new actors, although that statement is not an assertion of universalization. Moreover, it is not a quantitative fact, because for the feminist people to become broader, it is necessary for the demands of particular identities to be articulated in a counter-hegemonic field. We are witnessing such articulations in the public space and the emergence of new actors. Taking to the streets in demonstrations and activism in different spaces have the potential to transform identities; that is what happened with the emergence and development of Ni Una Menos. Adolescents and youth's discourses contributed to this populist momentum. It was possible because of what was learnt at the NWM, and because of Ni Una Menos' actions, the Integral Sexual Education workshops where they could be developed, families' relationships undergoing democratization processes, and in terms of some changes in gender and power relationships.

I have mentioned that when women's and other identities' movements were articulated, “the feminist people” emerged. What was not anticipated was the appearance of adolescent and young people's collective action that decisively influenced the struggle for the legalization of abortion, despite it having suffered a temporary defeat.

As we have seen, the feminist rebellion is global. In October 2016, a women's strike was the Polish women's movement's response to the attack from the forces called anti-gender, to impose complete prohibition of abortion in Poland. The day after Donald Trump was sworn into office as president of the United States (January 21, 2017), a great women's and LGBTTIQ collectives' demonstration took place, in that country and all over the world. Jim Rankin and Ellen Brait, reporters from Toronto Star Newspaper, published on January 22, 2017 an article whose headline read: “*She the People*”, referring to the strength and union of millions of women. In October 2017, the #MeToo movement emerged to denounce sexual misconduct practiced by powerful men.<sup>44</sup> One year later, Tarana Burke spoke in Chicago and said that:

**#MeToo does not have space for black girls. It doesn't have space for black women, it doesn't have space for queer folk, it doesn't have space for disabled people, people of color, transgender people, anybody else that's other. [...] #MeToo is about who is going to be taken down next – what other powerful, white, rich man is going to lose his privileges for a period of time.**

Both Gunnarson Payne's analysis of Poland's case and the article's headline refer directly to women as "the people". As Sławomir Sierakowski<sup>45</sup> asserted (2017), both Jarosław Kaczyński, the powerful leader of Law and Justice Party in Poland and Donald Trump, president of the United States, are confronted by a political force that had not been fully acknowledged in all its mobilization capability: women and other subaltern collectives. This is what is also happening in Argentina. The "Ni Una Menos" claims that were at first linked to violence against women were afterwards transformed and articulated with the "feminist people's" national and transnational demands, broadening its counter-hegemonic possibilities. ✘

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- 11 Quechua refers to one of the indigenous peoples in Argentina, Bolivia, Peru and Ecuador, especially to their language. Available at: <https://www.pagina12.com.ar/225288-todos-los-nombres>.
- 12 Di Marco, *Pueblo*, 294–310; Di Marco, *Claims*, 167–189.
- 13 Laclau, *Razón*, 15–31; 91–207.
- 14 In this chapter I will not discuss the notions of liberal democracies.
- 15 Di Marco, *Pueblo*, 296.
- 16 More than 3,700 people submitted apostasy requests during 2018. To date, three projects have been submitted to achieve separation between the church and the state.
- 17 Laclau, *Razon*, 99.
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- 19 Ernesto Laclau, "Universalismo, particularismo y la cuestión de la identidad", en *Emancipación y diferencia*. [Universalism, particularism and the question of identity], in Emancipation and difference]. (Buenos Aires: Editorial Espasa Calpe, 1996), 43–68.
- 20 Rancière, *Disagreement*, 38/39.
- 21 Rancière, *Disagreement*, 99/100.
- 22 I have been writing on the subject "Feminist People" since 2008, following Laclau's theory, to understand these articulations. I will present Jenny Gunnarsson Payne's (2019) similar analysis regarding Polish women's demonstrations against government's attempt to prohibit abortion: Jenny Gunnarsson Payne in her presentation titled "Women and 'The People', or Women as 'The People'? Populism, the abortion wars, and the (re)emergence of transnational sisterhood", at the International Workshop: "Política populista y reacción neoliberal" [Populist politics and neoliberal reaction] held in Buenos Aires in December 2016. At present, there is an important body of scholarly literature that takes this approach, with rich nuances. In Argentina, an example of this is the recently edited book: Graciela Di Marco et al. eds., *Feminismos y populismos del siglo XXI. Frente al patriarcado y al orden neoliberal*. [Feminisms and populisms of the 21st century. Against patriarchy and the neoliberal order] (Buenos Aires: Teseo Editorial, 2019).
- 23 Laclau, *Razon*, 189.
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- 25 Jean Copjec, *El sexo y la eutanasia de la razón. Ensayos sobre el amor y la diferencia [Sex and euthanasia of reason. Essays on love and difference]* (Buenos Aires: Paidós, 2016), 23.
- 26 Laclau, *Razon*, 127–130.
- 27 Di Marco, *Feminismos*, 66–70.
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- 29 Laclau, *Razón*, 287.
- 30 Sonia Alvarez et al., “Los viajes de los feminismos hacia otros movimientos sociales”. En *Crisis y movimientos sociales en Nuestra América. Cuerpos, territorios e Imaginarios en disputa* [“The journeys of feminism towards other social movements”] In *Crisis and social movements in Our America. Bodies, territories and imaginary disputed*, ed. Mar Daza et al. (Lima: Programa de Democratización Global [Global Democratization Program], 2014), 407–432; Elizabeth Maier and Nathalie Lebon, eds., *Women's Activism in Latin America and the Caribbean* (New Jersey, USA: Rutgers University Press, 2010).
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- 32 *Black Monday* (Black protest) of Polish women (Czarny Protest- Black Protest because of the colour of mourning clothes), which was inspired by the strike carried out by women in Iceland on October 24<sup>th</sup>, 1975- “*Free Women's Day*”: to draw attention to the income inequality between women and men. This strike, held to protest the government's attempt to prohibit abortion, was followed by a second strike “against state violence and ignorance” about women's problems, in October 2016. The Catholic Church condemned the strike, regarding it as the devil's carnival. The protest extended to several countries, such Iceland, Germany, and Russia.
- 33 Jenny Gunnarsson Payne, “Women and ‘The People’, or Women as ‘The People’? Populism, the abortion wars, and the (re)emergence of transnational sisterhood”, presentation at the International Workshop: “Política populista y reacción neoliberal” [Populist politics and neoliberal reaction] held in Buenos Aires. December 2016. In the article published in 2019 she refers to the “feminist people” and “transnational feminist people”: Jenny Gunnarsson Payne *Kobiety jako lud*: *Czarne Protesty jakosprzeciw wobec autorytarnego populizmuw perspektywie międzynarodowej* (ted.). [Women as a “people”: Black Protests as an opposition to authoritarian populism in an international perspective (1<sup>st</sup> ed.)]. In: Elżbieta Korolczuk, Beata Kowalskiej, Jennifer Ramme, Claudii Snochowskiej-Gonzalez (eds.), *Bunt kobiet: Czarne Protesty i Strajki Kobiet [Women's Rebellion: Black Protests and Women's Strikes]* Gdansk: European Solidarity Centre. 2019. 155–183.
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- 36 Laclau, *Razon*, 103.
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