

# Scarves for Struggles in A



# For Women's Argentina

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In March 2020, Nina Brugo and Norita Cortiña – two women who had been protesting in the streets and squares of Argentina for years – finally had something to celebrate in their struggle. They met during one of the many mass demonstrations demanding the right to legal abortion in Argentina, which finally became law in December 2020. Both were wearing scarves on their heads; Nina wore a green scarf to represent the fight for the right to abortion, while Norita wore a white scarf from the *Madres de Plaza de Mayo* (Mothers of Plaza de Mayo). Their meeting brought together the past and the present, crystallizing anti-authoritarian women’s struggles in Argentina.

## The legacy of Madres de Plaza de Mayo

Madres de Plaza de Mayo left us the scarf as a symbol of struggle and resistance, of dignity and courage. They decided to wear white scarves over their heads to demand the return of their sons and daughters detained and disappeared by military or security forces during the military dictatorship of 1976-1983. The Madres began their struggle in 1977, protesting authoritarianism and its practices of forced disappearances, murder, and torture. Despite the progress of truth and justice – with 273 of 1058 human rights offenders trialled – most of the victims are still missing. Although 46 years have passed since the military coup of 24 March 1976, an estimated 300 kidnapped children are still missing. Only children who were taken together with their parents or those born in captivity are accounted for. The daily search continues for the missing children, with the hope that they will be found and that they will discover their true identities.

The Madres were mobilized by the overwhelming force of mothers seeking to recover their children. They hit the streets with their experiences; they were workers – seamstresses, teachers, journalists and “housewives” – and in some cases they had political or union ties. When the Madres took hold of the Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires, they sought answers every Thursday afternoon as they paced around the Pirámide de Mayo, in front of the Casa Rosada presidential palace. The



Madres began to wear white scarves to identify each other. The scarves were a simple white triangle, initially made out of diaper cloth. Over time, some began to embroider the names of their sons and daughters and the date of disappearance in blue characters; others used a cross stitch to write the words “Aparición con Vida” (Alive Reappearance). The white scarf became a symbol that united the Madres in their pain, sheltering them and giving them strength in their struggle for memory, truth, and justice.

These vigils were replicated in squares across Argentina. The Madres persistently held their messages high. When the police forced them to move along, they began to walk arm-in-arm so they could not be stopped. The Madres continued to walk every Thursday until the fall of the dictatorship, with some continuing until this day; into their eighties and nineties, upright or in wheelchairs. The Madres were often persecuted and repressed by the state. In 1977, Azucena Villaflor de De Vincenti, María Eugenia Ponce de Bianco, and Esther Ballestrino de Careaga were disappeared along with their sons and daughters for their active roles in Madres de Plaza de Mayo. The military was desperate to disarticulate the movement, but never succeeded.

In the years after the end of the dictatorship, the Madres, with their white scarves, were present in solidarity



with other Argentinian and global struggles. They supported educational projects as well as workers' demands. They were in the Plaza de Mayo during the massive demonstrations in December 2001, when they were repressed by mounted police and tear gas. They were present as witnesses of countless hearings during the reopening of the trials for the crimes perpetrated by the state during the dictatorship. They were also present to witness the repressive state policy or tacit consent of crimes committed by the Argentinian Anticommunist Alliance (Triple A). They sought other ways to fight against the forced disappearances, not only during the dictatorship but also in democracy, as they continued to search for their own sons and daughters. That is why the Madres demanded that forced disappearances

be recognized as a state crime in the text of the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance, approved by the United Nations General Assembly in 2006.

### **The green tide for legal abortion**

Decades after the emergence of the white scarves, green scarves were worn in the city of Rosario, during the XVIII National Women's Meeting in 2003. The event was held within the framework of the National Campaign for the Right to Legal, Safe, and Free Abortion, where the scarves were used for the first time in the closing protest. Once again, the scarf was an aesthetic-political resource to recognize participants, meet, and



show unity in the struggle. Some say that green was chosen to evoke life, hope, and new beginnings. Others say the choice of the colour green was because it was not associated with any political party. Over the years, green scarves flooded a multiplicity of spaces in Argentina and also transcended borders to become a powerful symbol of protest throughout Latin America and the rest of the world.

Nina and Norita also joined the movement in the streets fighting for sexual and reproductive rights known as the *marea verde* (green tide or green wave). The multitude of women who made it possible in recent years, wore green scarves tied to various parts of their bodies to show support for the cause. The scarves read: “Educación sexual para decidir, anticonceptivos para no abortar, aborto legal para no morir” (Sex education to decide; contraceptives to avoid abortion; legal abortion to avoid

death). The *marea verde* became a movement that gained momentum and increased the visibility of messages being heard by society. Within the tide we could get excited, smile, sing, dance, and even shout – at times – despite the rain, cold, and darkness. Such was the eve of one of the debates in the National Congress, which would open the doors to the first law for the right to decide about our bodies.

In the struggle of the *marea verde*, multiple generations shared a common goal: the elimination of deaths from clandestine abortions. We do not want to lose any more daughters, sisters, mothers, and companions. We took to the streets to denounce preventable deaths of women due to their lack of access to safe abortions in hospitals, and also against the criminalization of women for having abortions. We demanded the right to our own life and the right to make choices about our bodies. “La maternidad será deseada o no será” (Motherhood will be wanted or it won’t be) was one of the slogans enthusiastically raised during those days of struggle, which still today is marking a path to follow.



The delayed but eventual approval of a law guaranteeing the right to abortion in Argentina did not stop the movement. Activism continued to focus on the implementation of the law and its diffusion in all corners of the country. The green scarves continued to be tied with conviction to our bodies, gaining presence in the streets, awakening debates and the claiming of the right to decide. This movement is also necessary in resisting those who want to roll back reproductive rights. This is seen in the overturning of the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* precedent, which protected women's freedom to choose abortion in the United States, a decision made in 2022 by the US Supreme Court and its conservative majority. The ruling made it clear that we must continue defending the rights that have already been won.

## Inspiration and solidarity

Throughout recent history, we can see how white and green scarves have met and become entangled, as represented in the meeting of Nina and Norita in the struggle for the right to legal abortion. None of this was coincidental. The scarves evoke a deep feeling in Argentinian society; they have the strength of history, of the struggle against dictatorship and authoritarianism, which allows them to be recognized even when they are dyed another colour. History returns, inspires the collective struggle, and nurtures solidarity among women, visions of motherhood and life, and of feminist politics. On these journeys, the scarf has earned its place as a symbol both in history and in the present women's struggle. It was instituted as a symbol that is resignified, transformed, and dyed in different colours to mobilize for other rights and dreams.

All this is possible because the *Madres de Plaza de Mayo* have taught us, through their lifelong struggle, that "the only struggle that is lost is the one that is abandoned".