

Marianismo as Political Fulcrum in the Midst of Crisis, Argentina 1976 – 2004

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Two major crises have plagued the last 40 years of Argentine history. The first was the political crisis of the militant bureaucratic authoritarian regime that lasted from 1976 until 1983, while the second was the economic crisis that began in 1998 that lasted until approximately.¹ The transition of women in advocacy, first through maternalism and then through feminism in the midst of these two crises, can be best explained in the context of quotidian disruption theory (QDT) and the degrees of freedom granted by the Argentine state.² Quotidian disruption requires that there is a threat to the mundane “taken-for granted routines and attitudes of everyday life.”³ There are four conditions that are most likely to disrupt the quotidian and incite mobilization:

- 1) Accidents that throw a community’s routines into doubt and/or threaten its existence; 2) actual or threatened intrusion into and/or violation of citizens’ sense of privacy, safety, and control; 3) alteration in subsistence routines because unfavourable ratios of resources to claimants or demand; 4) and dramatic changes in structures of social control.⁴

¹ Opinion varies on when the crisis actually started and ended, depending on what is considered to be the inciting event

² Quotidian disruption theory is a tangential subset of Breakdown theory.

³ Elizabeth Borland and Barbara Sutton, *Quotidian Disruption and Women’s Activism in Times of Crisis, Argentina 2002-2003* (Gender and Society 21(5)), 703.

⁴ David A. Snow, Sarah Anne Soule and Daniel M. Cress (2005), *Identifying the Precipitants of Homeless Protest Across 17 U.S. Cities, 1980 to 1990* (Social Forces 83(3)) 1183.

The quotidian exists in two dimensions: daily practices and routines and cognitive component, or essentially all of these practices, which are taken for granted. Quotidian disruption occurs when the environment challenges natural attitudes and customary habits, which is an “impetus for mobilization.”⁵ The first case of quotidian disruption this article will examine is the mobilization of the *Madre de la Plaza de Mayo* in Buenos Aires in response to the bureaucratic authoritarian regime, in an attempt to explain the maternal focus of the feminine collective action incited by quotidian threat. In this case, the *Madres* wished not to eliminate maternity as a gendered ideal, but to create a political role for maternity within the confines of the Argentine state. The second case study that will be examined is the economic crisis of 1998-2004 in Argentina and the ensuing feminist mobilization. This form of activism was built on the foundation of collective action created by the *Madre* and maternalist ideology twenty years prior, though came to include the innovation of new visions of women’s role in society as well.

MOBILIZATION OF THE MADRE DE LA PLAZA DE MAYO

For centuries, gender relations in Argentina could be defined by the culture of *machismo*, before being redefined by the culture of *marianismo*. *Machismo* is by definition the dominance of males over males and females in a patriarchal state; in this way, in women are defined by their traditional roles as secondary actors to men.⁶ *Marianismo*, a second wave of cultural gender norms bolstered by the Catholic Church, defines the female gender as being “semi-divine” – that is, femininity grants women the qualities of moral greatness, spiritual power and insists on complete submission to the

⁵ Borland and Sutton, 2007, 703.

⁶ Ashley McEachern (2009), *Feminist Identities in Argentina: The Divergence Between Women’s Movements and Feminism*, (Patterson Review: The Norman Paterson School of International Affairs), 92.

needs of men.⁷ It is through *marianismo* that maternalism is cultivated and maintained as an Argentine value. Political actor and feminist Paulina Luisi's moral reformists developed a hybrid of *marianismo* and feminism during the beginning of the twentieth century. Luisi defines feminism as:

[...] Demonstrating that woman is something more than material created to serve and obey man like a slave, that she is more than a machine to produce children and care for the home; that women have feelings and intellect; that it is their mission to perpetuate the species and this must be done with more than the entrails and the breasts; it must be done with a mind and a heart prepared to be a mother and an educator; that she must be the man's partner and counselor and not his slave.⁸

This definition forms the basis of the *Madres* political goals, and details two arguably distinct ideals – feminism⁹ and maternalism¹⁰.

The threat posed by the military bureaucratic authoritarian regime meets three of the four

conditions of disturbance in the QDT – the first, second and fourth. The first and second conditions, that is, the accidents that throw community routines into doubt and the threat to human security and safety, were materialized through the regime's threat to make people 'disappear'. This threat was made real by the fact that over 30, 000 individuals disappeared during the time of the Dirty War.¹¹ The tyrannical overthrowing of the democratic government and the subsequent introduction of a military regime manifested the change in the structure of social control. This regime insisted on neoliberal economic and political policies, which were very taxing on the quotidian conception of the structure and greatly threatened the control it promised. In revolt against the the disappearances and the military regime, every Thursday afternoon mothers and grandmothers would stage demonstrations in the main square of Buenos Aires – the Plaza de Mayo – to reclaim their children, who had been deemed terrorists or subversives by the regime.¹² These women came to call themselves the *Madre de la Plaza de Mayo*.

The *Madres* normalized their protest by making it quotidian routine, and ritualized their revolt against the regime by their rights as mothers. In doing so they helped to create a new quotidian. This new quotidian lacked the strength and dimension granted by political freedom, an idea that will be developed in a section below when examining the economic crisis of 1998 through 2004.

The *Madres* adopted a strong stance against the regime, and benefited from the rights and responsibilities granted to motherhood – they use the state's metaphor of women-as-state to hide from its violence and brutality in plain

⁷ McEachern, 2009, 92.

⁸ Jeffress Little (1975), *Moral Reform in Feminism: A Case Study* (Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs 17(4)) 387.

⁹ Within the context of this paper, the term feminism will refer to any politicized movement (not exclusively female-led) which aims to create gender equality through legislation in areas such as sexual rights, labour rights, individual rights and enfranchisement. During the bureaucratic authoritarian regime, feminism was strongly associated with Marxism; that misnomer is not within the parameters of feminism considered here.

¹⁰ Maternalism, within the context of this paper, will include the cultural idea of *marianismo*, and all the rights therein allotted to women. These are a part of the foundation of the hegemonic structures of the Argentine state, and include sexuality, family, Catholicism, maternity, and formal politics which holds women in an unproblematic place as the individual responsible for maintaining the family on a daily and generational basis (Michael Keith and Steve Pile, *Place and the Politics of Identity* (Routledge: New York, 1993) 1.)

¹¹ Sara Eleanor Howe (2006), *The Madres de la Plaza de Mayo: Asserting Motherhood; Rejecting Feminism?* (Journal of International Studies 7(3)) 43.

¹² Howe, 2006, 43.

sight.¹³ In fighting for the normalcy of the quotidian, mothers fought through the confines of the traditional virtue of maternalism – and by doing so, the *Madres* reinforced the idea that a woman's primary role is that of a mother to her children – in following *marianismo*, she is submissive to the rights of all those to whom she is obliged. In this way, the movement didn't challenge the quotidian construct of maternal identity in Argentina. In fact, it played to their advantage as it gave women "visibility in a representational system that rendered most women invisible."¹⁴ It is through this power that women shifted from passive observers to active agents in the social movement. However, by working within the parameter of maternalism, the advocacy was directed not towards women's rights, but was subverted for the rights of others (their sons).¹⁵

It is therein that the dividing factor between maternalism and feminism is found – it is for whom the advocacy was being done that differentiates the maternal from the feminist. Where maternalists aimed to advocate for the rights of those they were required to care for through *marianismo*, their approach as mothers gave them a voice and agency within the system. Feminists, however, sought to advocate for themselves, rejecting the engrained values of *marianismo*. Therefore, feminists during the time of the dictatorship were given no agency whatsoever. Through the use of traditionally allotted power, maternalists undermined the efforts of feminists whose aim was to move away from the identity of women as mothers and towards the image of women as individuals of equal societal stature.¹⁶ Maternalists rejected the

idea that legal motherhood should be confined within the family and be subject to male control, which was a part of the agenda of the feminist perspective of the time. In this way, although the women in the *Madre* movement did not believe in equal representation of genders in the political spectrum, they nonetheless aimed to contribute a *feminine* perspective (Howe 47). They wished not to eliminate maternity as a gendered ideal, but to create a political role for maternity within the confines of the Argentine state. This defied the feminists' goal of breaking down the traditional compartmentalization of women in the Argentine *marianismo* culture. The idea of gender equality would assign women esteem and agency in the system – something earned through political conflict and competition, not gifted by *marianismo* with the condition of subversion. The *Madres*, however, openly rejected feminism. This rejection was caused by, in large, Peronist politics, and the resulting cultural and social clashes.

Arguably the most notable influence in the formation of feminist rhetoric in the 20th century in Argentina was that of Evita Perón and her Peronist Feminism. Prior to Peronism, the women's movement was strong, with simple cleavages caused by a divided enemy – men, capitalists and imperialists were the top contenders. Peronism and Peronist Feminism weakened extant feminism. Literature criticizing Western feminism, including Evita Peron's own writing, identifies women in Latin America as the victims rather than the agents in women's movements. As such, feminism was adopted by the bourgeois, as seen above, and made unavailable to common women of the time, creating the aforementioned simple cleavages much more pronounced. The strong link established by Evita Peron to imperialism caused a further divide.¹⁷ This is furthered by the Peronists government's fragmentation of women's movements and feminism through

¹³ Keith and Pile, 1993, 101. This metaphor is largely based on the ideals of *marianismo*, as they existed within the foundations of the bureaucratic authoritarian regime.

¹⁴ Howe, 2006, 45

¹⁵ McEachern, 2007, 89. Due to the emphasis placed on responsibility of women to care for others, and the disenfranchisement of women in the state, and as such, in the formal political process.

¹⁶ Howe, 2006, 46.

¹⁷ McEachern, 2009, 91.

the use of anti-feminist policies. Women were invited into politics, but were dissuaded from using feminist language and instead encouraged to conform to the traditional roles of maternalism. In order to be accepted into the political realm, women simply could not identify as feminists. This created a group of women in politics founded on the exclusion of feminists and women who had, at some point, been identified with anarchism and socialism. It resulted in a political system with females who, although present, were positioned as “passive, subordinate, and submissive actors in the political sphere”.¹⁸

By the cultural norm and religious obligation of *marianismo*, women were confined and committed to their role as mothers, subordinating their rights (social and political) to those whom they were bound to protect and serve. Women were given some latitude to petition gender roles, however, due to the overarching patriarch rule, the conflicting nature of *marianismo* and feminism, and the reinforcement of the position of women in politics by Peronist politics, Argentine women could not identify as feminists.¹⁹ During the time of the *Madres*, feminism was strongly associated with lesbianism and female superiority which, given *marianismo*, strongly dissuaded mothers from supporting feminist goals.²⁰ Furthermore, there was a prevalent feeling of class exclusionism between feminists and maternalists, a division introduced by the Perón administration. The attitude surrounding maternalism was casual and socially transient; that surrounding feminism was of privilege and bourgeois ambition, created by Evita Perón. In this way, the bourgeois feminists were criticized by maternalists for subordinating all other issues

to those of gender demands.²¹ In this way there were many erroneous definitions of feminism circulating in Argentina that dissuaded women from engaging in the ideology.

Just as it is true that the ideology surrounding the advocacy of the *Madre de la Plaza de Mayo* did contradict feminist ideology of 1970s and 1980s, it is also true that it helped bolster the position of feminist rhetoric in the Argentine culture. Women broke the barrier between the private sphere to which they were confined by *marianismo*, and entered the public sphere – by doing so, they enabled themselves to not only be the object of, but the subject in political action and in doing so created a new quotidian.²² This new quotidian – achieved through politicized mediums by maternalists to publically adopt the role of mothers – allowed for some reconstruction of the idea of motherhood. It went from being “women seeking to protect the sanctity of the mother-child bond within the existing political system” to “women wishing to transform the state so that it reflects maternal values”.²³ This new quotidian incorporates some feminist virtues as women developed a gendered consciousness through their actions that went beyond maternalism, to challenge the social constructions surrounding femininity.²⁴ In this way, maternalists infuse politicized movements with a feminine perspective. By doing so, they created space in the political sphere for feminine (and by extension, feminist) rhetoric, a strength that had been lost in Perón’s regime.

Threats to quotidian normalcy provide incentive for social advocacy and mobilization, as was seen

¹⁸ Sonia Alvarez, *Engendering Democracy in Brazil: Women’s Movements in Transition Politics*. Princeton (N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990) 22.

¹⁹ McEachern, 2009, 90.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 89.

²¹ M.G. Bouvard, *Revolutionizing Motherhood: the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 1994) 191.

²² Keith and Pile, 1993, 101.

²³ Howe, 2006, 47.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 46. Maternalists accomplished the establishment of a new feminine image that reflected feminist value via avenues that fundamentally undermined the tenets of the feminist struggle in Argentina.

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to which this mobilization can occur is limited both by the democracy of the state and the degree of freedoms granted to those within the state.²⁵

Twenty years after the regime in

Argentina,

with democracy (mostly) restored enabling the rights and freedoms of citizens, feminine-led advocacy during a second bout of quotidian disturbance looks different. Under the governance of the military regime, women mobilized through maternalized avenues with maternalist aims. This is due to the fact that agency and protection were granted to women ascribing to maternalist values. Twenty years later, in the re-democratized state, women are no longer restricted to hiding behind maternalism.²⁶

ARGENTINA: ECONOMIC CRISIS OF 1998-2004 AND THE ENSUING FEMINIST MOBILIZATION

The quotidian disturbance conditions that the Crisis agrees with, however, are quite different. Whereas the regime incorporated conditions one, two and four, the Crisis incorporates conditions three and four. The third condition

states that the disturbance should be caused by an "alteration in subsistence routines because [of] unfavourable ratios of resources to claimants or demand".²⁷ The resource that the Argentines were lacking was money (and thus employment) and government officials. The lack of government officials will become a symptom of the third condition once society mobilizes, and is coincidentally the situation which corresponds to the fourth condition of quotidian threat – which states that there ought to be a dramatic change in structural social control.²⁸ The night after President De La Rúa declared a state of siege, five thousand citizens gathered outside the apartment of Minister Cavallo, the the minister of finance, "banging on pots and pans, and after an hour of that he resigned, taking the whole cabinet with him overnight". The petition cry for the Crisis was "*Que se vayan todos*" (They all must go!).²⁹

The Crisis, which was initially provoked by the country's economic challenges, cascaded into violent riots and protesting.³⁰ The government phased in Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) designed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in order to combat the effects of the Crisis, although these policies had negative implications with devastating impacts on women and children. The impacts of SAPs on the Argentine population include increased unemployment and underemployment, a decline in real wages, accelerated inflation, the elimination of state-subsidized food, and decreased government expenditures on social

²⁷ Snow et al., 2005, 1.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Borland and Sutton, 2007, 701.

³⁰ The economic causes of the Crisis are threefold. The first was the devaluation of the Argentinean peso in 1999 after it was pegged to the American dollar – which had the intended effect of reducing hyperinflation, but when it devalued, investors switched their attention to Brazil. Second was the extensive foreign and domestic borrowing of the Menem government which drove interest rates up and many businesses into bankruptcy. Finally, privatization of public sector goods (such as electricity and other utilities), in combination with high unemployment, resulted in steady increase in the cost of utilities which furthered the issue of domestic debt (Luna).

²⁵ In this context, freedom refers to the affirmation of personal security provisioned by the state, wherein the re-democratized state ensures the protection of personal rights and freedoms.

²⁶ The economic policy of both Menem and Rúa's governments closely resemble those enacted during the militant bureaucratic authoritarian regime of the 1970s and 1980s, which provides control for the reaction of women to policy.

services including health and education.³¹

During the time of the Crisis, *marianismo* was still an engrained value in the Argentine state, where women were expected to primary caregivers to children and maintaining a household, though combined is also their responsibility in the workforce. Here, women were overrepresented in the lower echelons of many careers, concentrated in professional paths targeted by government cutbacks.³² To be an educated woman in Argentina does not mean to have “higher than average levels of labour force participation”.³³ Women with secondary education earn significantly less – approximately half as much as their male counterparts – and the income gap becomes more pronounced higher up the education scale.³⁴ In Latin America in 2004, 9.4 million women from urban areas were unemployed (6.8 million more than the recorded numbers in 1990) – unemployment rates were around 20 percent.³⁵ Female unemployment in 2005 (just after the Crisis) was four percent higher than that of male unemployment, where the rates were 14.8 percent and 10.8 percent respectively.³⁶ This was the reality of the threat posed by the Crisis to quotidian labour norms, without even accounting for the informal sector.³⁷ The Crisis greatly affected women’s household labour, most markedly through the decreased access to resources, making

household maintenance, child care, and other home-based responsibilities much more labour intensive and onerous.³⁸ The unprecedented levels of poverty brought upon Argentina’s historically large middle class disrupted life for those already living in abject poverty, as well as those being forced into poverty.

The challenges instigated by the Crisis challenged gendered practices and casual or unquestioned assumptions about the roles of women in the workings of a community, inciting activism and collective action in groups of women. This form of activism was built on the foundation of collective action created by the *Madre* and the maternalist ideology twenty years prior, twinned with the innovation of new visions of women’s roles in society.³⁹ Thus feminism emerges at the forefront of social activism in Argentina, subjugating maternalist movements. No longer is it necessary to hide behind maternalism to be allotted a voice – personal rights and freedoms are protected in the re-democratized regime. Hence during the economic crisis, subsequently referred to as the Crisis, women participated in street protests and many mixed-gender groups – *piqueteros/piqueteras* (picketers), *empresas recuperadas*, popular assemblies, and *barrio* committees,⁴⁰ among many others.⁴¹ The activist quotidian during the Crisis was threefold⁴² – they developed a new urban landscape of protest, made activism into a form of additional work, and adopted new sets of relationships

³¹ Helen Safa (1990), *Women’s Social Movements in Latin America*, (Gender and Society 4(3)) 357.

³² Borland and Sutton, 2007, 706.

³³ Lais Abramo and Elena Valenzuela (2005), *Women’s Labour Force Participation Rates in Latin America*, (International Labour Review 144(4)) 378.

³⁴ Abramo and Valenzuela, 2005, 377. This income gap is accounted for by occupational segregation that is assumed to generally exist in the labour market. Employers in Argentina exploited female workers by paying lower wages and practicing discrimination/risk-aversion against female workers at the compensation level (Lee, Cho 445).

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 379.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 380–381. The dichotomy between male and female unemployment is as narrow as it is because women are more flexible about taking/leaving paid employment as their supply of labour is more elastic in its adaptation to demand than is male supply of labour (Abramo, Valenzuela, 2005, 380).

³⁷ The informal sector will be used to describe work performed by women in their home, as domestic workers and as vendors.

³⁸ Borland and Sutton, 2007, 706.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Safa, 1990, 357.

⁴¹ Borland and Sutton, 2007, 703. *Empresas recuperadas* were recuperated businesses and factories taken over by the workers once the businesspeople were forced out of business.

⁴² The Crisis generated a new societal sector in which advocacy could engender itself into Argentine rhetoric. While protest levels were exorbitant, they gradually became normalized by society – a part of daily life, expected and routine. It has been argued that this form of everyday action as a form of resistance is paramount to the vocalization of a marginalized cohort of society. This form of regularized protest is consistent with the ritualized *modus operandi* of the *Madre de la Plaza de Mayo*, though simultaneously more liberal and more feminist in nature. (Sutton)

and conflicts, the former two being key to this investigation.

In creating a new urban landscape in which to protest, women created a direct line of communication with the government and effectively appealed to the Argentine population. According to media estimates, in 2002 there were 12,766 street protests over an eight month period between January and August.⁴³ Women were a key part of these protests,

[shaping] the city's landscape as they marched with baby strollers, played drums and chanted protest songs outside the cathedral, put their bodies on the line in roadblocks, rallied demonstrators with megaphones, and distributed bread and roses to pedestrians as a symbolic act. Graffiti...inscribed walls and streets in the centers of power with messages such as 'Take Your Rosaries out of Our Ovaries' and 'Women Building Popular Power.'⁴⁴

In this way, women were politicizing their quotidian position in political and social hierarchy, and demanded that it be changed. The first of the two graffiti quotes is quite poignant as it demonstrates the acknowledgment that the church has, not only in the issue of abortion, but also the engraining of *marianismo* into the feminine quotidian. The mobilization of women through activities such as protests and graffiti art has incurred greater legitimacy for gender-based claims being made.

The translation of activism into an additional form of work was very important given the rising unemployment rates and treatment disparities in the workforce. Women sought parity through the activist quotidian and

created environments that emulated the ideal employment situation possible. This was done through joining social movements, creating organizations, engaging in new roles in order to incorporate new routines and frames for understanding the different realities attached to such participation. In some cases, women institutionalized survival tactics into forms of advocacy – some such cases include *comedores populares* or *ollas comunes* (public kitchens) for food, or *talleres productivos* (workshops) for teaching life skills such as making clothing and other small trades.⁴⁵ In other cases, women were responsible for evaluating solutions to the crisis. They would accomplish this through a three step process. Firstly, they would collect data via primary research, creating surveys and conducting interviews. Secondly, these women's organizations created documents like flyers to appeal to the masses or petitions to gain popular support to create policy change. Finally, they would create and participate in workshops. These jobs were often difficult and unpaid, though in the wake of unemployment, gave many women a sense of purpose in and meaning, and equally enabled the supplementation or replacement of other jobs.⁴⁶ These women's activist work incorporated the stereotyped 'women's issues': gender violence, access to contraception and issues related to abortion.

The Crisis that began in 1998 and lasted until approximately 2004 allowed women to identify the specific burdens imposed on them by the combination of neoliberal globalization with *marianismo*-led gender subordination. Through this identification, women re-oriented themselves through mobilization, allowing for reshaping of activist priorities. Whereas the *Madre de la Plaza de Mayo*'s activism focused on keeping maternalism central in policy surrounding women, women activists during the Crisis identified a more clearly feminist goal – that is to say, a goal striving for the parity of

⁴³ Borland and Sutton, 2007, 709.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Safa, 1990, 357.

⁴⁶ Borland and Sutton, 2007, 710.

women in Argentine society. The contributions made by female quotidian activism contributed to the:

Prompting of President De La Rúa's resignation, the repeal of laws that shielded dictators from prosecution, the creation of a large household subsidy program, laws in Buenos Aires to permit civil unions for gays and lesbians and the interruption of pregnancies with unviable fetuses, the appointment of the first women to the Supreme Court during democracy, the expansion of reproductive and sexual health laws, and growing criticism of neoliberalism and the US influence in Argentine and world politics.⁴⁷

The progress made in the way of the stereotyped "women's issues" was rather extensive.

CONCLUSION

The activist quotidian politicized the mundane and created new spaces to challenge the status quo during the military regime of the 1970s and 1980s, and again during the economic and political crisis of 1998 until 2004 (approximately) in Argentina. The difference in fundamental influences lies not in the quotidian threat condition, rather in the level of democracy and thus the degree of personal rights and freedoms ensured by the state. During the military bureaucratic authoritarian regime existing from 1976 until 1983, the only vein of women's activism that allowed intervention or involvement to dissent within the regime was *marianismo*. The *Madres de la Plaza de Mayo* were the main actors in this movement, and did so by reinforcing the maternal values of the Argentine culture. This is in part due to the lack

of agency granted to citizens by the regime, and even more so to the lack of agency granted to women as autonomous actors within the political system. Politically, license was granted only when advocating for the rights of those to which they were bound by *marianismo* to protect and serve. Furthermore, women were discouraged from engaging in feminism socially due to the stereotypes attached to it such as lesbianism and bourgeoisie superiority, and culturally by Peron politics. Given the security of personal rights and freedoms as provisioned by the promise of the redemocratization of Argentina, and the impetus to become mobile evidenced by the quotidian threat of economic instability, women would simply demand agency, and thus not restrict themselves to maternalism. It is thus that mobilization focused on women's rights as described by feminist belief during the Crisis is created and results achieved.

The transition of women in advocacy first through maternalism then through feminism in the midst of crises in Argentina can best be

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explained in the context of quotidian disruption theory (QDT). The outcomes of this analysis indicate that in a context of moderate democracy established

through redemocratization, controlling for the conditions of quotidian disturbance observed, feminism is the primary means of positive social mobilization. In a context of authoritarianism with suspended personal rights, maternalism will be the ideal promoted for women's roles in society.

⁴⁷ Borland and Sutton, 2007, 713.