

## **#NiUnaMenos: Not One Woman Less, Not One More Death!** <sup>[1]</sup>

Recent protests against femicide in Argentina reveal the deep roots and spreading branches of feminist activism in Latin America.

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On October 19, hundreds of thousands of women across Argentina <sup>[3]</sup> braved a torrential downpour to participate in two extraordinary protests: an unprecedented women’s strike and a massive demonstration against femicide (*femicidio*)—that is, the killing of cis-gender and transwomen because of their gender. Reacting in rage and sorrow to the October 9, 2016, murder of Lucía Pérez <sup>[4]</sup>, a 16-year-old high school student from the city of Mar de Plata who had been abducted, drugged, and gang-raped so viciously that she died of her injuries, Argentine feminist organizers relied on social media to organize the strike and orchestrate the protest in less than a week. Dubbing the demonstrations “Black Wednesday,” the protests were notable not only for their rapid organization and widespread diffusion, but also for their framing of gendered violence as inextricably linked to gendered structures of power— a point that was exemplified in the signs, slogans, and speeches that accompanied the demonstrators on city streets across Argentina. “Not even one woman less! We want us all alive!” thousands marched and sang, drummed and yelled.

What’s more, the efforts of Argentine feminist organizers sparked a transnational response. Reports found that in addition to at least 138 separate protests <sup>[5]</sup> that took place in Argentina, there were 25 protests in Chile, seven in Bolivia, five in Mexico, two in Uruguay, two in Honduras, and others <sup>[6]</sup> in the capital cities of Paraguay, Ecuador, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, and beyond.



NiUnaMenos posters from around the region (Facebook)

Former Argentine president Cristina Fernández de Kirchner wrote an open letter [7] in support of the protests, while the current president of Chile, Michelle Bachelet, taped a video [8] pledging her allegiance. Participants were amazed by the massive public presence and the creative ways in which women took the streets wearing all black—“a cipher code that was at the same time evident to everyone,” in the words of one striker.

The protests also claimed historical spaces of national political struggle: in Argentina, it was the first time the emblematic Plaza de Mayo—traditionally the space of unions and political parties—filled with women chanting “patriarchy is going to fall!” In Chile, Alejandra Ramm from the University Diego Portales noted that she never thought she’d see the phrase “Ni Una Menos” projected on the front of the country’s presidential palace, La Moneda. Meanwhile, in Brazil, subtle gestures were also present as, for instance, one

lecturer recalled going to teach her university class wearing black in solidarity with Argentine women, only to find that many of her students were wearing black as well. As political analyst Veronica Gago wrote <sup>[9]</sup>, “We can feel proud of having made palpable and visible the international strength that the women’s movement has had since its beginnings.”

What can these events tell us about the current state of gender politics in the region? Are we witnessing a new feminist “wave” in the region, made up of a wider range of participants, united behind a broader spectrum of demands? And if so, how much of what happened in Argentina can be explained by transnational trends, and how much is due to national dynamics? It is too soon to be able to answer these questions definitively, but we offer some evidence for further reflection.

### **Organizing Against Gendered Violence in Latin America**

Latin America has long been the site of protest and policymaking around violence against women. Drawing on their experiences of authoritarian repression and economic austerity, activists have drawn connections between violence perpetrated by the state and by private actors. Beginning in the 1980s, feminists built regional networks at the Latin American and Caribbean Feminist *Encuentros* (Encounters or fora). The first *Encuentro* in Bogotá, Colombia, declared a Day To End Violence Against Women <sup>[10]</sup> on November 25, which is now observed worldwide. Participants chose the date as a tribute to the Mirabal sisters, who were killed on that day in 1965 for their opposition to the Dominican dictatorship of Rafael Trujillo.

This kind of activism pressured the Inter-American Commission on Women to take up the issue of gender violence, eventually transforming it into the Organization of American States’ vanguard Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment, and Eradication of Violence Against Women <sup>[11]</sup> in 1994. Its mission statement takes an overtly feminist perspective, locating violence against women within “the historically unequal power relations between women and men,” and insists that states work to prevent violence wherever it takes place. Feminist advocates lobbied their governments to adopt Convention principles through national legislation, resulting in nearly every Latin American country outlawing some form of violence against women in the last two decades. The regional influences are clear in the Argentine case: in 2009, the Argentine Congress passed Law 26.485, the Law of Integrated Protection to Prevent, Sanction, and Eradicate Violence Against Women <sup>[12]</sup>.

Regional activism has continued apace. The powerful slogan “*Ni una mujer menos, ni una muerte más*” (“not one woman less, not one more death”) was coined by Mexican poet and activist Susana Chávez Castillo in the 1990s to protest the notorious unsolved murders of women in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico. The October 19 protests were the latest entry in a long series of protests across Mexico, Central, and South America sparked by the murder of Chávez Castillo herself in 2011. In 2015 and 2016, Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Mexico, Peru and Uruguay reclaimed her words to organize campaigns and demonstrations <sup>[13]</sup> against femicide and violence against women.

In Argentina, the ability to organize massive demonstrations less than a week after the femicide of Lucía Perez is rooted in past experiences of post-dictatorship women’s organizing. Argentine women’s and feminist activism has been enriched by the yearly in-person meeting called the *Encuentro Nacional de Mujeres* (National Women’s Encounter or ENM), that emerged in the 1980s modeled after the regional *Encuentros*. As they constructed a space for deliberation on issues ranging from human rights to external debt, abortion to sports, sexuality to indigenous peoples, Argentine women forged connections between gender and other issues of structural inequality, according to Amanda Alma and Paula Lorenzo, authors of *Mujeres que se encuentran* <sup>[14]</sup>.

However, ENM organizers have contended with overtly hostile local authorities <sup>[15]</sup>. In late September of this year, the ENM took place in Rosario, in the northern Argentine province of Santa Fe. At least 70,000 women participated in the events. On the very day Lucía

Perez was murdered, police fired rubber bullets [16] into the final march to repress participants objecting to right-wing Catholic counterdemonstrators.

This confluence of activism, repression, and horror sparked the October 19 strike and protest inside and outside of the capital. Lesbian feminist activist and Rosario-based journalist Irene Ocampo explained in an interview that the “effective, rapid, and dynamic” response that enabled their local protest of 15,000 [17] relied on the wide and deep roots of feminist activism. Feminist and women’s organizations brought word of the effort to a local organizing assembly, which multiple generations of activists and nearly all the organizations that had been responsible for the ENM attended. They also reached out to local unions of state and university employees for their support. But these activists, and others across the country and the region, would also rely on a more direct example of organizing around violence: the NiUnaMenos protests of the last two years.

## **The Making of #NiUnaMenos**

Building on a performance organized as a marathon of literary readings in front of the National Library [18] in March, 2015 against femicides, the “Ni Una Menos” collective of prominent feminist journalists, artists, and lawyers, including figures such as Marta Dillon, an editor at *Página 12*, started a Facebook page [19]. The hashtag #NiUnaMenos [20] spread virally and caught the attention of the media. They capitalized on their professional and activist networks, as well as their symbolic and social capital to great effect. Gendered and sexualized violence became the topics of talk shows, national newspapers, radio programs, Facebook, and Twitter trends. Even future President Mauricio Macri, who has been implicated in empowering anti-abortion activists, was photographed holding the slogan “Ni Una Menos.” [21]

On June 3, 2015, the first massive “Ni Una Menos” demonstration against gender violence gathered 300,000 people [22] in front of the National Congress and in major cities around the country. High school and college students, young families, and workers representing different parties, organizations, and movements filled the square in front of Argentina’s National Congress in Buenos Aires, making it almost impossible to walk. Groups of girls and boys remixed songs from the 2014 World Cup and danced while singing “In this society, abuse is so normal, that we still think women are the ones that provoked it.” Participants listened as actress Erika Rivas, actor Juan Minujin, and cartoonist Maitena read out the demands [23]: the full implementation of Law 26.485 – only eight of its 45 articles had been implemented [24] — the publication of official statistics on sexual assault, institutional and judicial guarantees for women’s protection and access to justice, and the inclusion of gender violence in the curricula of sexual education and training of all state officials, including the police. Following the march, Ni Una Menos collective members, like Florencia Abbate, said they saw changes in how the media covered violence against women [25], as they adapted to a heightened awareness on the part of their audience against victim-blaming. The protest signified a turning point where gender inequality became a public issue relevant to all Argentine society.

As an ever-more heterogeneous group of organizers participated, the second Ni Una Menos march in June 2016 broadened the interpretation of violence against women, bringing in demands for the decriminalization of abortion, an end to transphobia, and the rights of sex workers alongside opposition to trafficking women and girls. As Abbate explained to *Argentina Independent*, the framing was open to all [25]: “Ni Una Menos belongs to everyone, and there are groups who want to identify as Ni Una Menos in the other provinces and parts of the country who unexpectedly use our logo to promote their local demands.”

The culmination of two years of regionally inspired national organizing across many media platforms on ever more interrelated issues led to the perfect storm of the hundreds of thousands who braved the rain on October 19.

## The October 19 “Black Wednesday” Protests

The "Ni Una Menos" collective and another 50 organizations called for the October 19 “Black Wednesday” strike and protest, which integrated demands for women’s social and economic rights in an unprecedented manner. “We were hundreds of women ... with the same will to organize ...to say one more time: ENOUGH!” the October 19 call read. “And together we decided to strike: those who have a formal job and those who don’t, those in cooperatives, who have precarious work, those who do care work and do not receive a salary, the unemployed, the students, the artisans, the artists, all of us. Strike for an hour outside of our workplaces to make ourselves visible. Strike then march. Wear black.”



NiUnaMenos protestors congregate, a sea of umbrellas in downtown Buenos Aires (Photo by Felicitas Rossi)

In the packed Buenos Aires subway on the morning of the 19th, women wearing all black smiled at each other as strangers with common goals. It did not matter if they were left or right, or from the political opposition or not: they were all against femicides. One rider described the commute: “When the doors opened at each station you could hear women shouting ‘Ni una menos!’ to others on the platform who answered ‘*vivas nos queremos!*’ (we want us alive!)” It was a very emotional moment, the subway was filled with

these slogans, from anonymous, nearly ghostly voices.” A female conductor’s announcement on the H Line went viral: “Take care of your belongings, but also take care of women, who are not your belongings. *Vivas nos queremos!*”

Between 1 and 2 PM, thousands participated in the symbolic women’s strike under a powerful slogan: “If my life has no value, reproduce without me.” Using their actions to pointedly critique the business-as-usual negotiations between the National Union Confederation and the neoliberal government of President Macri, workers left all manner of workplaces, from the shoe stores of busy commercial streets to the National Library, and from the University of Buenos Aires to the National Congress.



A storefront in Buenos Aires displays a poster calling for a women's strike (Photo by Natacha Ebers)

At five that afternoon, as a river of 150,000 protesters <sup>[26]</sup> under umbrellas congregated at the downtown Obelisco and flowed down to the Plaza de Mayo, myriad handmade posters exemplified the formation of a bottom-up gender justice agenda. Teenagers and young women focused on empowering images and demands to be free to go out in public, with signs reading “I don’t want to be a victim, and

I want to be free.” Women linked to popular movements and trans women underscored the criminalization of social protest, demanding freedom for [social activist Milagro Sala](#) <sup>[27]</sup>. Feminist collectives advocated free and safe abortion. Indeed, the very idea of “Black Wednesday” was inspired by Poland’s [“Black Monday”](#) <sup>[28]</sup> protests a few weeks prior, in which Polish women demonstrated against a total ban on abortion in the European country.

Women from unions and movements holding signs that read “[economic] adjustment is part of the violence,” emphasized the runaway costs of basic services and decreasing real salaries. The [speech read out at the end of the march](#) <sup>[29]</sup> referred to femicide waged against Argentine women as “the most extreme expression of a patriarchal logic, one that subjugates, objectifies and undervalues women across all spheres of life.” The chants of the activists who overflowed the Plaza de Mayo reverberated throughout downtown Buenos Aires: “Power, power, popular power, now that we are together, now that they see us, the patriarchy will fall, it will fall.”

In the days after the protest, long-standing social attitudes toward women were up for debate. Victoria, one participant, reflected in an interview that the protests “resulted in a lot of new conversations.” “Many friends told me about family discussions about the protest when surprised fathers heard for the first time that their daughters had been groped when they were younger, or that men in the street had exposed themselves to them,” she said. Another participant added, “I was surprised by many men who expressed their concern about these issues from I think a feminist perspective.”

While it might be too early to speak of a new wave of feminist organizing, we can point to some important developments. For one, the recent protests have demonstrated a deepening understanding of the link between gender violence and other forms of gender inequality. Although social media is far from the only resource upon which such massive public repudiation of gendered structures of power are based, we also appear to be witnessing the continued development of creative links between on and offline repertoires of action; whether online, on the street, or around the family dinner table, gender politics have a new presence and resonance.

As fifteen-year-old Ofelia Fernández, president of the student union at an Argentine high school, explained at the protest: “[Our] society was 100% *machista* but now we are starting to hear about abortion, about women’s trafficking, femicide...we are starting to speak about gender inequality,” she said. “Being a feminist is about understanding these realities, criticizing them, but mostly is about doing something to transform them.”

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[7] <http://cfkargentina.com/lucia-ni-una-menos/>

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