Using Political Motherhood to Reveal the “Truth”: How Mothers Took on the State’s Lies in Argentina’s Period of State Terrorism and Sri Lanka’s Civil War

Crystal Whetstone, PhD Candidate (University of Cincinnati)

*WPSA 2018 conference paper*

Abstract: This paper investigates contested truth in Argentina’s period of state terrorism (1976-1983) and its aftermath and Sri Lanka’s Civil War (1983-2009), specifically in the context the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo and the Mothers’ Front. The former was an autonomous group that confronted the Argentine military dictatorship for its practice of enforced disappearances in the late 1970s, and the Mothers’ Front challenged the state for disappearing individuals wrongfully deemed guilty of offenses against state forces in the 1980s and 1990s both autonomously and in connection to a political party. Using political motherhood, a form of women’s political participation rooted in women’s identification with motherhood, the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo and the Mothers’ Front grappled with the deceit of the respective regimes of Argentina and Sri Lanka. I explore the different contexts, authoritarianism and illiberal democracy, to discern how civil society groups should (or should not work) with state institutions. The literature on social movement and institutional alliances is biased towards liberally democratic contexts and the global North. This paper adds to feminist theorizing on movement-state alliances by highlighting a Latin American and South Asian case in authoritarian and illiberal contexts, and adds to the comparative politics of gender literature by exploring cases set in different regions.

Key words: Feminism; social movements; political parties; political motherhood

**Introduction**

 This paper[[1]](#footnote-1) investigates contested truths in Argentina’s period of state terrorism (1976-1983) and its aftermath and Sri Lanka’s Civil War (1983-2009), specifically through the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo and the Mothers’ Front’s civil society work, which arose in the search for their disappeared children. The former was an autonomous group that formed in 1977 to confront Argentina’s military dictatorship (1976-1983) for disappearing citizens, even as the state denied these enforced disappearances were taking place (Bouvard 1994). The Mothers’ Front formed autonomously in northern Sri Lanka in 1984 to call out the Sri Lankan state for disappearing young men falsely accused of terrorism, while a southern branch of the Mothers’ Front was developed in 1990 by two politicians to serve as a group for women who took on the government for disappearing individuals wrongly deemed guilty of offenses against the state (Samuel 2006). Using political motherhood, a form of women’s political participation based on women’s identification with their roles as mothers, the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo and the Mothers’ Front grappled with the deceit by the respective regimes of Argentina and Sri Lanka, with the former working autonomously until 1986 when the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo split into two branches, the Founding Line and the Association, the former of which sought to work with the government after the transition to democracy while the latter continued its oppositional position to the government (Bouvard 1994). The northern Mothers’ Front worked autonomously to call out the state for ignoring the rights of its Tamil citizens, while the southern Mothers’ Front was allied with the Sri Lankan Freedom Party (SLFP) (Thiruchandran 2012).

Using a qualitative comparative case study method, I explore the shifting contexts of authoritarianism and illiberal democracy in which the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo and the Mothers’ Front operated to discern how civil society groups should or should not work with state institutions depending on the political context. I take a feminist angle, arguing that a feminist analysis of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo and the Mothers’ Front’s engagement with and disengagement from state institutions is most appropriate because these organizations each represented a critical mechanism to increasing women’s political participation, that of political motherhood, which can further women’s ability to influence and participate in political decision-making, a major aspect of feminism. In today’s political climate, deceit is gaining ground globally, particularly within the online stratosphere, where new avenues easily spread falsities, carried out by agents of the state as well as anti-state groups. Currently, the most infamous case has been Russia’s use of bots to interfere in the domestic politics of the US, France, Germany and Britain by influencing ordinary citizens. This paper will highlight past lessons of civil society activists who were able to reveal untruths, which strengthened contemporary democratic movements.

Based on my assessment of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo and the Mothers’ Front, I argue that to attain, strengthen and sustain a healthy democracy, the combined efforts of civil society groups using political motherhood and following different routes of democratic participation—both aligning with political parties and supporting these parties in government as well as standing as radical oppositional forces to parties as well as the state—help address state untruths, including the current global rise in authoritarianism through new avenues of deceit in the cyber world. Through an exploration of four key moments in the history of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo and the Mothers’ Front, this paper incorporates a broader understanding of movement-state alliances and rejections by focusing on women as movement actors and by looking outside the global North. The literature on social movement and institutional alliances is biased towards democratic contexts and the global North, particularly in the case of women’s participation in social movements (Basu 1995). This paper adds to feminist theorizing on movement-state alliances by highlighting a unique comparison of a Latin American and South Asian case in authoritarian and illiberal contexts, and adds to the comparative politics of gender literature by exploring cases set in different global regions (Tripp 2006).

**How political motherhood can be deployed for political mobilization and political demands**

Truth is vital to sustaining healthy democracies. However, history is replete with examples of governments lying to citizens. This paper focuses on instances of untruths in state-directed wars against the state’s own citizens, the period of state terrorism in Argentina (1976-1983) and during parts of the Sri Lankan Civil War (1983-2009), during which the state was challenged by women using political motherhood. In each of these respective contexts, the state engaged in disappearing citizens to dispose itself of individuals it perceived as causing problems for the regime (Bouvard 1994; Taylor 1997; Samuel 2006; Thiruchandran 2012). In both Argentina and Sri Lanka, forces of the state may have thought that such “indiscretions” would be overlooked as either necessary for state security or due to fears of citizens to speak up in an environment where the tactic of enforced disappearance—frequently a death sentence—was being practiced (Taylor 1997; Samuel 2006). Instead, some ordinary citizens came together to hold the state accountable to reveal the truth in Argentina, under both military dictatorship and transitioning/illiberal democratic regimes, and in Sri Lanka, under two illiberally democratic government regimes, during which the government in power sought to deny, minimize and/or play up the issue of the disappeared depending on the regime in power (Bouvard 1994; Taylor 1997; Samuel 2006). Both the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo and the Mothers’ Front challenged the state’s version of events and spoke out against its untruths on the issue of the disappeared. These women sought to ensure that the truth would come out about the state’s crimes against its citizens, and they sought to preserve the memories of their disappeared children, the latter of which has been against the wishes of even democratic governments who seek to move past these events (Bouvard 1994; Samuel 2006).

The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo and the Mothers’ Front each took on the state through political motherhood. Political motherhood is a form of women’s political participation in which women draw upon their identities as mothers to access the political sphere, in this case civil society, although women have also used this form of participation to access government positions (Chaney 1979; Orleck 1997). Political motherhood is notable for using the politicization of the feminine to inspire women’s political mobilization. In most societies, politics has been defined as a male space. By relying on the traditionally feminine identity of mother, some women have been inspired to enter the ranks of civil society (Orleck 1997; Hawkesworth 2012). In addition to allowing more conservative or previously politically inactive women to engage politically, political motherhood has provided cover for women working in hostile political environments where civil society exists under constrained conditions such that individuals suffer curtailed civil liberties and political rights, by allowing women to argue that they are not in fact engaging in political behavior but rather are carrying out their maternal duties (Noonan 1995; Howe 2006; Mhajne and Whetstone 2018). For example, in the US during the height of the Cold War in the 1960s, a time when the US was illiberally democratic, a group known as Women Strike for Peace organized against nuclear arms and criticized US government policy. Still in the era of McCarthyism, which persecuted left-leaning civil society groups, Women Strike for Peace used political motherhood to justify their activism. By claiming that their sole interest was a maternal obligation to protect their children’s future, they were able to navigate the restricted political space of leftist groups in the US during the Cold War. They did so by engaging in public protests during which they performed their maternal status by surrounding themselves with their children and pushing strollers and by wearing dainty clothing such as white gloves to emphasize their femininity. In doing so, Women Strike for Peace survived an investigation by the House of Un-American Activities Committee, which had shut down many groups it deemed too critical of the US or too far to the left (Swerdlow 1990; Wu 2013). Despite its strategic usefulness, some feminist scholars have been critical of this form of women’s political participation, arguing that it limits women’s prospects by confining them to the traditional role of mother (Dietz 1985; DiQuinzio 1993; Feijoó 1994; Noonan 1995; de Alwis 1998; 2012).

Like Women Strike for Peace, the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo and the Mothers’ Front each deployed maternal discourses and symbolism that resonated in their own political contexts, that of Argentina and Sri Lanka, which portrayed them as caring mothers through religious and cultural institutions (Bouvard 1994; Samuel 2006; Mhajne and Whetstone forthcoming). As studies on the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo and the Mothers’ Front have shown, political motherhood as a mobilization tool appealed to the women who formed these groups, most of whom had never been previously politically active, being mainly absorbed in the day to day of their private lives, particularly with their children.[[2]](#footnote-2) This all came to an end once their children were disappeared, which awoke many women to the political realities in which they found themselves (Bouvard 1994; Samuel 2006). In Argentina, this reality was an oppressive military dictatorship that had outlawed public assemblies and banned political party activity. Citizens feared for their lives. Any individual working on the political left was at risk of being disappeared, along with anyone who engaged in activities that sought to uplift the socioeconomically disadvantaged, with such individuals deemed terrorists and a national security threat. Approximately 30,000 mostly young people were ultimately disappeared. The military regime claimed that they had a duty to defend Argentina from internal “subversives.” The junta justified its actions through jingoistic nationalism and by claiming to be the defender of such nebulous concepts as traditional values, Western civilization, Christianity and capitalism (Taylor 1997).

Sri Lanka experienced a decades long armed conflict from the 1980s through the 2000s (1983-2009), and while the war has ended, conflict continues among the country’s three major ethnic communities of the Sinhala, Tamils and Muslims.[[3]](#footnote-3) In the 1980s, the Sinhala-dominated government began fighting Tamil armed guerrilla groups in the north intent on creating an independent state for the Tamil community, known as Tamil Eelam (Tamil Land). A widening ethnic cleavage between the Sinhala and Tamil communities, indirectly caused by British colonialism,[[4]](#footnote-4) had been exacerbated following independence in 1948 through legislation that proclaimed the Sinhala language and Buddhist religion the official state language and religion in the 1950s and 1960s. The growing conflict between the Tamil and Sinhala communities failed to be addressed through the country’s electoral system or through political dialogue in the 1970s and has been protracted due to the lack of cross-cutting cleavages among the Sinhala and Tamils. Each community speaks separate languages, Sinhala and Tamil, and the majority within each community practice different religions, Buddhism and Hinduism respectively, and each community has historically inhabited different regions of the country, with the Sinhala community dominating the southern region of the small island country, and Tamils predominating in the north. When Tamil political parties, largely the purview of older men, failed to meet the Tamil community’s preferences, many young people began joining various armed groups that sought to bring Tamil independence through more violent means (Thiranagama 2011; Oberst, Malik, Kennedy, and Kapur 2014). The Sinhala-dominated military increased its surveillance and harassment of the Tamil-majority northern region of the country by the early 1980s whether individuals were affiliated with armed separatists or not. By the late mid-1980s, one armed group rose to dominance in the Tamil-majority area, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which set up a political system in the north that functioned like a de-facto state, which became increasingly authoritarian over time. During the 1990s and most of the 2000s, the LTTE led an offensive against the state in a bid to make northern Sri Lanka an independent, Tamil-majority state (Thiranagama 2011; Thiruchandran 2012; Oberst et al. 2014).

While the north was the theater of war, there was growing violence in the Sinhala-dominated south starting in the 1980s, linked to a leftist and Sinhala nationalist political party the Janatha Vimukthi Perumuna (JVP), which led a violent uprising against the state in response to the government’s signing of the Indo Lanka Accord (1987), a peace treaty with India, which allowed an Indian Peacekeeping Force into Sri Lanka to help resolve the ongoing armed conflict between the LTTE, now the sole major armed faction in the north, and the government. The JVP viewed Indian involvement in Sri Lankan affairs as a violation of the country’s sovereignty and considered the government in power, led by the Sinhala-majority party the United National Party (UNP) under the leadership of J. R. Jayawardena, traitorous for allowing outside forces into its borders. The JVP attacked the state forces of the military, police and government, as representatives of the UNP, as well as political candidates, civil society activists and ordinary citizens who supported the Indian intervention (de Mel 2001). In response to the JVP-led insurrection, the state, still under the UNP but now led by Ranasinghe Premadasa, sought to crush the JVP, whose membership base was that of the impoverished and marginalized Sinhala male youth of the rural areas of the south, by going after all young men, whether members of the JVP or not. Thousands of young men[[5]](#footnote-5) were disappeared during this period, while others were killed in violent acts out in the open (de Mel 2001; Samuel 2006).

**Social movements versus state institutions and political outsiders versus political insiders**

The above discussion of the situations in Argentina’s period of state terrorism (1976-1983) and Sri Lanka’s civil war (1983-2009) make clear the differing political contexts of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo and the Mothers’ Front. This section delves into the literature on social movement and state institution alliances and the roles of political outsiders and insiders from the perspective of feminist literature. I argue that a feminist analysis of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo and the Mothers’ Front is most appropriate because these organizations served as important mechanisms to increasing women’s political participation in civil society and to increasing women’s ability to influence and participate in political decision-making, a major aspect of feminism. The benefits of movement alliance with parties has been evidenced in material and symbolic support through ties to the party, as well as ready access to state decisionmakers. However, radical and oppositional movement forces are important for lessening the impact of political compromises on political outcomes since the existence of more radical positions can broaden the political bargaining process by moving political preferences along the points of the extremes (Piven and Cloward 1977; Basu 2003).

*Working with and against the state*

 Women’s political participation is a key aspect of the feminist movement, which seeks to increase women’s equity and equality, among other issues. Feminists have long debated whether to work within state institutions or to work outside these structures to influence policy that will result in feminist outcomes, however various feminists define feminist outcomes[[6]](#footnote-6) (Kantola 2006). Radical feminists have tended to label the state and its institutions, including political parties, male-dominated and patriarchal, and on this basis have rejected these spaces as unworthy of feminist activity (Basu 2003; Kantola 2006). It is true that most state institutions and political parties globally remain male-dominated (IPU 2017). In contrast to radical feminists, other feminists have sought to infiltrate state systems to bring in women and women’s perspectives with the aim of creating women-friendly and/or feminist policies within state institutions, most notably through the femocrat approach, in which bureaucratic feminists, or femocrats, have sought to influence policies, particularly within the state civil service (Franzway, Court and Connell 1989). Other women have followed a similar path working in political parties through what is known as double militancy, in which women operate as both a member of a political party and a feminist group, seeking to influence party activity to incorporate feminist principles into how the party operates and in its policy platforms (Francheshet 2004). These strategies, which can broadly be termed insider strategies, in which feminist work within the system, have been contrasted with outsider strategies, in which feminists seek to influence the state through social movement work, in which they remain firmly entrenched in civil society, which lies, at least in democracies, outside the direct control of the government (McCammon and Campbell 2001; Francheshet 2004; Kantola 2006). However, those who engage in insider strategies within state institutions tend to support feminist social movement work and likewise, even if they engage in social movement work, many feminists also support certain political parties and participate in electoral politics.

*How parties and social movements converge*

 There is significant overlap between political parties and social movements, which often share the same motives. In fact, many parties are linked to social movements and many members and organizations within social movements support particular political parties (Kriesi 2014). Parties are formalized organizations, considered a state institution because they are sites for determining who will go on to set the parameters of the state, either the party or party coalition in power. Parties have a significant influence on state institutions such as the executive, legislative and judiciary branches as well as the civil service and other instruments of the government bureaucracy (Kunovich and Paxton 2005; Basu 2015). In contrast to parties, social movements are made up of informal social networks that connect individuals and civil society groups, both formalized and informal groups, who share relatively similar policy visions. Social movement actors often practice contentious politics that take a stand against other political ideologies, representatives of government or the state and even specific individuals (Kriesi 2014). Some political parties are connected to social movements and when such a party comes to power, it shapes state institutions by making them more receptive to the party’s ideologies. This in turn influences broader patterns in the political sphere that allow the social movement supporting the party to become more influential within civil society. Consequently, this bolsters the impact of the social movement’s influence on the government and state institutions. While social movements can strengthen a party’s chances of attaining control of government, the party in turn can bolster the influence of social movements once they come to power (Basu 2015).

**Disrupting the public space with the private truth**: **Using political motherhood to ascertain the truth in Argentina and Sri Lanka through political insider and outsider approaches**

In both Argentina and Sri Lanka, the mothers, and in some cases the wives, of the disappeared came together to challenge the state for the truth of the whereabouts of their loved ones by deploying political motherhood, which gave these groups the necessary cover to carry out their political activities. Both groups demanded that their loved ones be released if alive and sought justice against those who had committed these heinous enforced disappearances, emphasizing a strong link between truth and justice. Through political motherhood, the women were able to organize in hostile political environments where social movement work had been sharply curtailed. In Argentina, it was completely outlawed, as was the case in southern Sri Lanka in the period of investigation (1987-1992) (Bouvard 1994; Samuel 2006). Likewise, it was extremely dangerous in northern Sri Lanka in the period of the northern Mothers’ Front existence (1984-1987), during which time the region was under intense state surveillance and repression as well as the increasingly repressive grip of the LTTE. All of this curtailed individuals’ freedoms and made organizing autonomously difficult and increasingly impossible (Samuel 2006; Thiruchandran 2012).

*Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo*

During the first few years of the military junta in Argentina, the regime denied that enforced disappearances were taking place. Following the kidnappings of their children, which often occurred in the middle of the night, the distraught mothers sought information from official sources. However, they were shunted from police stations to military barracks to government offices in their desperate search since the regime had directed all state forces to deny any knowledge of anyone being disappeared. Yet the women persisted and eventually the government set up an office at the Ministry of Interior that pretended to collect information on the disappeared. After countless but fruitless days spent at the Interior Ministry office, a group of fourteen women decided that they needed to do more than demurely seek information. Although public assemblies and political protests were banned, this small group of women began gathering on a weekly basis to march around the Plaza de Mayo, a square at the heart of Argentina’s capital Buenos Aires, which was a space historically used for political rallies and speeches and the location of the presidential residence, La Casa Rosada and a number of other government buildings. During these marches, which were completely silent due to the oppressive circumstances of the dictatorship, the group slowly gained courage to demand the return of their children, and week after week they continued to march, soon bearing photos of their children as they circled the plaza (Bouvard 1994; Navarro 2001). This was the initial founding of the group that would become the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, an autonomous, self-organized group of mature women who used their maternal status to navigate the difficult environment of a constrained civil society.

Increasing numbers of women joined the weekly marches following their initial gathering held in early April 1977, and after months of marching around the plaza as well as persistently seeking a meeting with then President Jorge Rafael Videla, the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo were finally granted a meeting. Videla denied there were any disappeared, instead insulting the women by telling them that their children were traitors to the nation who had cowardly fled Argentina, suggesting that their daughters were all “prostituting themselves” and that their sons had all run off with “some girl” (Bouvard 1994, 70). However, denial of the disappearances was difficult since international human rights groups, US and European ambassadors to the country and citizens-in-exile were all reporting widespread enforced disappearances. By 1979, the regime had largely stopped engaging in enforced disappearances, but the junta still refused to divulge any information on the whereabouts of those who had been disappeared, not even confirming if they were dead or alive. The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo did not back down but kept their weekly marches going and engaged in other political work, seeking transnational connections to human rights groups both within Latin America and beyond, and with important officials in the US and across Europe and the United Nations, in order to bring attention to the issue of the disappeared. The group formalized in 1979 but even by the fall of 1977, the group was widely known as the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, a group of activists who saw themselves as distinctive from other human rights groups because of their maternal status (Bouvard 1994).

By the early 1980s, a dismal economy was causing infighting among the military regime as the junta sought a solution for rising inflation. Their strategy was distracting the public with nationalism through a war to gain the nearby Malvinas Islands (Falkland Islands) for Argentina, which belonged to Britain. However, the junta lost in a humiliating defeat, which outraged the citizenry, who were already frustrated with the increasingly dire economic situation, as well as human rights situation on the need for democracy and on the issue of the disappeared, which the human rights movement kept in the public spotlight (Bouvard 1994; Taylor 1997). The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo had spoken out against the Malvinas Islands war, arguing for peace as well as an end to military rule. The group was integral to Argentina’ democratic transition, which took place at the end of 1983 in part because their organizing, bolstered by the use of political motherhood, had helped to create space for the broader human rights movement in Argentina’s constrained civil society, which along with the devastating loss to Britain, forced the military dictatorship to step down (Bouvard 1994; Keck and Sikkink 1998). The Mothers were hopeful that the incoming transitioning government would take on the issue of the disappeared, seeking to bring back their children if alive and holding the previous government accountable for its crimes against humanity. However, the new democratic government, under Raúl Alfonsín, feared upsetting the military whose leaders might easily be convinced to engage in another military takeover. Although Alfonsín had campaigned on holding the military accountable, his government passed laws that provided amnesty to all lower ranking military members if in participating in kidnapping, illegally detaining, torturing and/or murdering anyone, they had been following orders. In 1985, top members of the junta were tried for the terror they had wrought, but the next democratic government, under Carol Menem, did away their sentences, bestowing full immunity (Bouvard 1994; Taylor 1997).

The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo were furious with the post-transition governments, thoroughly illiberal, for exonerating the military of its crimes against humanity.[[7]](#footnote-7) The group was an outspoken critic of the newly democratic government at a time when most of the population wanted to put the period of state terrorism behind them. However, for the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, Argentina’s democratic future was tied to its past and the junta’s crimes had to be addressed. They refused to let the truth die. They believed that if the issue of the disappeared was brushed aside that Argentina could easily slip back into authoritarianism. While all members of the group held these beliefs, there were growing differences in their preferred approach to this issue. In 1986, in a dramatic and highly emotional split, the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo began operating as two separate lines, the Founding Line and the Association. The Association Mothers insisted on speaking out against the Alfonsín government for its decision to allow lower ranking military members immunity for their crimes as perpetrators. While the Founding Line Mothers agreed that the administration should hold every individual who committed such heinous acts accountable, this group believed that civil society must not openly criticize the fledgling democracy. The Founding Line also disagreed with the Association’s stance on disavowing working closely with political parties and hoped that by engaging with parties, the group could ensure that their policy aims were more easily translated into reality, while the Association maintained that autonomy from parties was the key to transforming Argentinian political culture (Bouvard 1994). Thus, the splitting of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in the period of post-transition (illiberal) democracy fell upon the decision to work within or outside of state institutions.

*The Mothers’ Front*

 Unlike the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, the Mothers’ Front was split from the beginning into a northern and southern branch (Thiruchandran 2012). In August 1984, a group of LTTE fighters attacked Navy forces along the coast near the north’s major city, Jaffna, during which several members of the military were killed. In response to these attacks, security forces demanded that all young men report to local police stations and give their government IDs. Mothers from nearby villages brought their sons as requested. However, these approximately 500 young men were proclaimed to be the individuals responsible for the attack on the naval ship, despite the fact that they were innocent, and were secretly carted away to the south (Saturday Review 1984a; Thiruchandran). The mothers were 500 strong, in part thanks to the small contingent of women who had been laying the groundwork for political organizing against the state since earlier that summer (Saturday Review 1984a; 1984b; Thiruchandran 2012). These women gathered the mothers whose sons had been illegally arrested and disappeared to the south, calling themselves the Mothers’ Front, and organized a silent march through the streets of Jaffna—silent due to the oppressive atmosphere, which was a result of the state’s restrictive measures against the Tamil north—and ended the march at the local government headquarters. About 1,000 in number, the Mothers’ Front was joined by masses of men and women supporters numbering an estimated 5,000 to 10,000 (Samuel 2006). When the protestors arrived at the local government headquarters, they stormed the building and cornered the local head of government, demanding that he release their sons. Panicked, he called then President Jayawardena, explaining the situation. Jayawardena requested that a contingent of the Mothers’ Front meet with him in Sri Lanka’s capital of Colombo to engage in negotiations. However, the women refused, instead insisting that their children be immediately released and returned home without further delay. Ultimately the government relented and within a few days’ time, most of the children had been returned from their holding location in the south (Samuel 2006; Thiruchandran 2012).

 Over the next three years, the Mothers’ Front would work to settle disputes among the various armed guerrilla groups operating in the north and to bring attention to issues of importance to Tamil women (de Mel 2001; Samuel 2003; 2006). The northern Mothers’ Front was the first women’s group in the north to call for a peaceful solution to the civil war and they built significant connections with southern, Sinhala-majority women’s groups that worked in solidarity with the northern Mothers’ Front to demand that the government respect the human rights of all its citizens and seek a peaceful end to the conflict. The northern Mothers’ Front also provided food and other basic necessities for those whose livelihoods had been harmed by the state’s oppressive rule in the north justified on state security grounds, and the women brought attention to the issue of wartime rapes, which grew increasingly common after Indian Peacekeeping Forces entered the country following the signing of the Indo-Lankan Peace Accord in 1987 (Samuel 2006).

At its core, the northern Mothers’ Front sought to locate their disappeared children and to protect their children from future harms, and uniquely did so by presenting themselves as citizens of Sri Lanka, entitled to equal rights, which included the right to the truth, at a time when the UNP government did not view the north as citizens of the state (Thiruchandran 2012). The groups’ decision to exist as an autonomous force during a period of growing tensions among armed Tamil factions and tensions between these armed guerrilla groups and the Sinhala-dominated state, which also wrought violence against the population, presented ongoing challenges for the northern Mothers’ Front (Samuel 2006). By the mid-1980s, the LTTE was not only increasingly violent and authoritarian but ever more frustrated with the criticism against it from the Mothers’ Front, which sought autonomy and was outspoken against all violations of human rights, whether by the state or otherwise. While the LTTE appreciated the work the Mothers’ Front did in contesting the state for depriving citizens in the north of constitutional rights and of harming citizens through illegal detentions, torture and murder, the LTTE did not believe the Mothers’ Front should be criticizing its fellow Tamils, even if its concerns were true. The LTTE eventually forced the Mothers’ Front under the leadership of the LTTE, which turned it into a women’s charity organization, although the group’s core leadership left the north entirely, refusing to submit their autonomy (Samuel 2006; Thiruchandran 2012). The LTTE would accept no voices of dissent in the north while the northern branch of the Mothers’ Front was committed to telling the truth regardless of who would be shamed. Unfortunately, the group operated in a doubly dangerous political environment where both the state and the LTTE sought to quiet their demands for truth, justice and peace, and so were ultimately coopted and their aims altered entirely.

 The southern branch of the Mothers’ Front had its origins with the Sri Lankan Freedom Party (SLFP). Sri Lanka’s Sinhala majority has used its electoral advantage to dominate the country’s political system since independence in 1948. The two main parties, the United National Party (UNP) and the SLFP, have traded power back and since independence by engaging the Sinhala electorate through Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism, a form of ethnic nationalism that prioritizes both the Sinhala community and practitioners of the Buddhist religion as Sri Lanka’s “truest” national identity. This hegemonic ethno-nationalism is in part a reaction to the British preference for the Tamil-Hindu minority during colonial times, and much of Sinhala-Buddhist opinion argues that any apparent favoritism towards the Sinhala language and Buddhist religion is a righting of past favoritism for the Tamil community (ICG 2007). A number of smaller parties exist in Sri Lanka, including Tamil parties, which make up the current coalition of the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), as well as the leftist, Sinhala-majority JVP and the Sri Lankan Muslim Congress (SLMC) (Oberst et al. 2014). The JVP’s base was concentrated in the rural south among young men located far afield of the capital Colombo who lacked access to the kind of education that would enable to them to obtain well-paid civil service jobs. The party was both Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist as well as socialist-Marxist, with an emphasis on economic equality and income redistribution (ICG 2007).

In the late 1980s, violence by the JVP was growing, creating increasing danger for the UNP government, now led by Ranasinghe Premadasa, and citizens alike. For five days in April 1989, the capital Colombo was completely shut down and anyone who tried to work—even the impoverished working poor who could not afford to lose a day’s wages—were targeted by members of the JVP. The original cause of the JVP’s violence was their outrage with the UNP government’s decision to sign an accord with India, which allowed the Indian military to enter the country. This was viewed by the JVP as a violation of the country’s sovereignty and its members began targeting the police force to make clear the party’s rejection of the Indo-Lankan Accord (1987), soon moving on to target high level officials of the government, including assassinating the head of police, now as an outright grab for power (de Mel 2001). In response, the UNP government sought a show of force and the ranks of the federal police were likewise ready to seek revenge for the murders of their fellow officers killed at the hands of the JVP. This culminated in a massive outpouring of violence by state forces that did not take the time to identify members of the JVP but simply attacked all young men. As young men were disappeared, women, mainly their mothers but also some wives, began making the rounds at police stations to inquire information on their missing loved ones (del Mel 2001; Samuel 2006).

 Meanwhile, two male members of the SLFP, both parliamentarians, Mahinda Rajapaksa, future president of Sri Lanka (2005-2011) well noted for his authoritarian streak, and Mangala Samaraweera, saw how the JVP-led insurrection and the state’s violent reaction to the insurrection, was harming many of their constituents, party supporters and party members, many of whom had had their sons disappeared. The women most affected were Sinhala, since this violence was occurring in the Sinhala-dominated region of the south, and among many socio-economically disadvantaged women with limited education. The two MPs created a southern version of the Mothers’ Front but gave greater acknowledgement for the inspiration of their group to the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, foreshadowing the critique of the Mothers’ Front by feminist scholars that complained the southern branch failed to create an inclusive, multi-ethnic organization open to Tamil and Muslim women (de Alwis 1998; 2012; de Mel 2001). The southern Mothers’ Front was not a women’s wing of the SLFP, which already had a women’s wing. Rather the group instead functioned much like an auxiliary group, associated with party, which coordinated many of its events and also gave it a certain amount of protection from the UNP-dominated government (de Mel 2001; Samuel 2003). The UNP-led government was outraged with the Mothers’ Front, often making veiled threats towards the women, such as spreading a false rumor that the LTTE was going to harm them, in an effort to pressure them to cancel their demonstrations. The southern Mothers’ Front held an important rally in July 1990, where 1500 women with the Mothers’ Front joined together. In January 1991, the southern Mothers’ Front held its first convention and released a list of political demands, with the demand for the return of their children topmost, along with a criminal investigation of the disappearances and compensation for families affected by the disappearances. Other items included an end to the Sri Lankan Civil War, now going on for nearly a decade, through peaceful means (del Mel 2001; Samuel 2006).

The SLFP orchestrated many of the Mothers’ Front’s events and gave them material support, most notably in the form of transportation, helping to bus women to rallies (de Mel 2001). At many of the Mothers’ Fronts’ events, it was mainly SLFP politicians who gave rousing speeches, although the Mothers’ Front’s well-known female president Dr. Manorani Saravanamuttu also gave a number of speeches. Saravanamuttu, an upper-class Tamil woman who, along with the SLP connection, lent a strong air of respectability to the Mothers’ Front. Saravanamuttu’s son Richard de Zoysa had been a journalist documenting the UNP government’s human rights abuses at a time when the freedom of the press was greatly curtailed and speaking the truth invited great risk. Zoysa was disappeared but his body was discovered, murdered by state forces. Saravanamuttu greatly sympathized with the women who had had sons disappeared, who unlike her did not even have bodies to mourn (del Mel 2001; Samuel 2006; Fernando 2010). One of the strongest SLFP politician supporters of the Mothers’ Front was Chandrika Kumaratunga, the daughter of two former prime ministers, S.W.R.D. Bandiranaike and Sirimavo Bandiranaike, the world’s first female prime minister. [[8]](#footnote-8) Kumaratunga had lost her husband, also a politician, to an assassination and so resonated with the women of the Mothers’ Front. Kumaratunga supported their demands, particularly that the UNP government return the disappeared young men or compensate their murders, as well as the Mothers’ Front’s goal to bring an end of the ongoing Sri Lankan Civil War. In fact, Kumaratunga took on the Mothers’ Front’s aims as her platform when she ran for president in 1994 and once in office, the members of the southern Mothers’ Front witnessed many of their goals come to fruition. Official government commissions were set up to investigate the disappearances and economic compensation was offered to those families who had lost a loved one. Kumaratunga also began to engage in political dialogue with the LTTE to achieve an end of the civil war. [[9]](#footnote-9) Most members of the Mothers’ Front opted to return to their homes,[[10]](#footnote-10) burdened as they were with economic struggles and the need to manage their households. At one level, the members of the Mothers’ Front were satisfied with the justice that acknowledged, through the commissions, the atrocities that their children had endured, and the economic reparations given to these women by the state were sorely needed (de Alwis 1998; 2010; del Mel 2001; Samuel 2006).

Due to the southern Mothers’ Front reassurances from the SLFP, particularly the Kumaratunga’s coalitional SLFP-led government, most experts on the Mothers’ Front have speculated that the group felt comfortable removing themselves from civil society to carry on with their private affairs because they believed that the party would continue with the groups’ political aims (Samuel 2006; de Alwis 1998; 2012). Saravanamuttu had foreseen the need for the Mothers’ Front to separate itself from the SLFP to move towards autonomy and spoke at length in her speeches that the Mothers’ Front would indeed soon set out on its own, severing its connection to the SLFP. She had a great vision for the group and was hopeful that the organization could continue to grow and to take on other issues (Samuel 2003; 2006). However, it was not to be as members disengaged following Kumaratunga’s entrance into office.

**Analysis: how context affects institutional-movement alliances**

By exploring the different contexts, authoritarianism and illiberal democracy, in which the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo and the Mothers’ Front operated during differing periods of the period of state terrorism (1976-1983) and its aftermath in Argentina and during the course of the Sri Lankan civil war (1983-2009), I discern how civil society groups can most effectively decide when to work with, and when not to work with, state institutions such as political parties, and how within some environments civil society groups are more limited than in other contexts despite women’s use of political motherhood, a form of women’s political participation that can obfuscate women’s protesting by portraying their activism as the carrying out their maternal duties. Such lessons are useful today in a world of rising untruths and globally mounting authoritarianism.

*Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo as one organization operating under an authoritarian regime*

 The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo were not single-handedly responsible for the vibrant human rights movement under the military dictatorship but their organizing against the untruths of the state through political motherhood made space for the broader human rights movement that did eventually flourish, and their work at the transnational level, which brought significant international concern for ordinary Argentinian citizens, was integral to the regime’s eventual collapse (Bouvard 1994; Keck and Sikkink 1998). As an organization situated within Argentina’s human rights movement during the period of state terrorism (1976-1983), the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo organization was singularly united against the authoritarian military regime that had seized power through a coup, readily engaging in contentious politics that decried the untruths of the junta, and they directly challenged the state for disappearing their children. Two lies in particular, the regime’s claims that painted the disappeared as terrorists and the regime’s years’ long denials that they were practicing enforced disappearances, were the groups’ focus until the military dictatorship admitted to disappearing individuals. However, the junta labeled these acts necessary for national security and sought to bestow themselves amnesty. The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo denounced the lies that their children were terrorists, which in turn labeled the women bad mothers, and further condemned any offer of immunity for perpetrators of enforced disappearance. However, during the transition to democracy, which began when Raúl Alfonsín, the first post-transition president, took office in December 1983, not all members of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo continued to view the state, now represented by a democratic if illiberal government, as the enemy. In January 1986, the group had undergone a dramatic split into two branches, the Founding Line and the Association (Bouvard 1994).

*Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo as the Founding Line and the Association operating in an illiberal (transitioning) democracy*

The divide that led to the split of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo into the Founding Line and Association branches has more than one underlying cause, but one factor stands out, which was the decision by the Founding Line to forego publicly criticizing the post-transition democratically elected government of Alfonsín (Bouvard 1994). Although both branches of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo continued to vehemently disagree with the Alfonsín government’s decision to give immunity to lower ranking military members who participated in enforced disappearances, and later disagreed with the Carlos Menem[[11]](#footnote-11) government’s decision to do away with all sentences meted out to the top leaders of the previous military regime under Alfonsín, the Founding Line chose to work behind the scenes to influence the government to punish perpetrators rather than publicly speak out against the fledgling democracy (Agosín 1990; Bouvard 1994). The Founding Line branch believed that Argentina’s newly transitioned democracy was too fragile for their group to take a contentious politics approach, fearing the military was a major threat to Argentina, which might instigate another coup[[12]](#footnote-12) against the new democracy (Bouvard 1994). The Founding Line branch also readily engaged with political parties, particularly Alfonsín’s party, the Radical Civic Union (URC), which during the 1983 elections had signaled its intent to be more inclusive of women. In contrast, the Association branch believed that the Alfonsín government, and later the Menem government, were eroding any chance of Argentina’s continued success as a democracy by allowing the military impunity, and it therefore continued its oppositional stance toward the state. The Association also further cemented its autonomous status, declaring that the group would not work alongside political parties in formal or formal-like alliances (Bouvard 1994).

The military dictatorship had begun instituting neoliberal economic policies, and by the mid-1990s, Argentina had fully embraced neoliberal reforms, which triggered the economy to crash in 2001 and led to widespread rioting by ordinary citizens, especially through two social movements, the *piquetero* (picketers) movement and the workers movement of the 2000s. The former movement demanded government social services to alleviate food insecurity and the lack of other basic necessities caused by the abysmal economy, and the latter sought to empower workers, mainly those in factories, through more workplace protections, and demanded better working conditions and increased wages for workers. These two major social movements included strains of popular feminism and a significant number of women, some of whom used political motherhood to justify their activism (Sutton 2010). Civil society in today’s Argentina is flourishing, with women representing the majority of those engaged in civil society (Sutton 2010; Cosgrove 2010). That the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo split into the Founding Line, ready to work gently alongside the transitioning regime, and the Association, which maintained its oppositional and uncompromising stance, reveals the necessity of a diversity of approaches in civil society work, indicating how a messy comingling of insiders, outsiders, oppositional groups and state-movement aligned civil society groups are necessary to increase the vitality of a democracy, which is never firmly consolidated but rather is an ongoing process.

*The northern Mothers’ Front*

Like the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo’s fluctuating political environment in the period of state terrorism and its aftermath, the political context of the northern Mothers’ Front in the Tamil-majority region of the country shifted considerably from the mid-1980s to the late 1980s, although in contrast to Argentina in the 1980s, it shifted in an increasing restrictive way. From 1984 to 1987, the overall atmosphere of northern Sri Lanka was similar to that of the military dictatorship in Argentina. While Sri Lanka has been variously classified as authoritarian-like, illiberally democratic and democratic throughout the period of the civil war (1983-2009), there is little disagreement among most scholars that the north of the country suffered considerable political and violent repression, both at the hands of the state and the LTTE, during the Sri Lankan Civil War (1983-2009), which severely curtailed civil society activism in this period[[13]](#footnote-13) (ICG 2007; Thiranagama 2011; Oberst et al. 2014). By the mid-1980s, the LTTE had grown in power and was exerting increasing restrictions on the lives of most Tamils in the north and was unwilling to tolerate any dissent from the Tamil community, including the northern Mothers’ Front’s activism that called out the LTTE’s hypocrisies, although it had been more than willing to let the group protest the state (Thiruchandran 2012).

In the difficult environment of Sri Lanka’s northern Tamil-dominated region of Sri Lanka during the short life of the northern branch of the Mothers’ Front, the group experienced two levels of repression. At one level, the women were citizens of Sri Lanka, enduring human rights abuses by the state via restricted political rights and civil liberties and ongoing violences, such as the illegal detaining of their sons in 1984, which was the catalyst that ignited the formation of the Mothers’ Front. However, on a second level, they were operating in a hostile environment where the ethno-nationalism of the LTTE constricted the lives of the Tamil community, particularly Tamil women who experienced greater burdens exerted upon them through ethno-nationalist discourses that depicted women as mothers and future mothers of Tamil Eelam’s citizenry who would carry on the Tamil state, in addition to the repressive grip the LTTE wielded against the Tamil community (Maunaguru 2009; Thiranagama 2011). Gendered ethno-nationalist discourses likely explain the choice of the Mothers’ Front of political motherhood to carry out their activism. However, the tremendous violence against northern civilians as part of the larger Sinhala-Tamil armed conflict in tandem with the LTTE’s oppressive rule and gendered ethno-nationalist discourses ultimately doomed the northern Mothers’ Front. The group’s leaders disbanded the Mothers’ Front in 1987, although the organization carried on for a time as a charity group controlled by the LTTE, indicating a clear political outsider approach to the LTTE by its core leadership. The women who stayed with the Mothers’ Front under LTTE control either could not or were not willing to use their insider status to resurrect a more oppositional Mothers’ Front. It remains a counterfactual if the leaders had stayed with the group what might have happened with the northern Mothers’ Front. However, based on the well-noted brutality of the LTTE, including to its own members and co-ethnics, it is likely that any oppositional forces within the LTTE’s Mothers’ Front would have been wiped out relatively quickly. Despite the strategic use of political motherhood, state/de facto state and movement alliance was made impossible in an environment repressed by both the state and de facto state, which were also in conflict with one another in an ethnic conflict. The northern Mothers’ Front had little room in which to maneuver by 1987 and it is likely any alternative outcome for the group was impossible given the doubly hostile political circumstances.[[14]](#footnote-14)

*The southern Mothers’ Front*

 The southern Mothers’ Front was firmly situated in Sri Lanka’s broader human rights and women’s movements, and is a clear example of a political party-civil society alliance from the start due to the establishment of the group by two male parliamentarians from the Sri Lankan Freedom Party (SLFP). The SLFP provided the group with resources and a modicum of protection in a difficult environment in which Premadasa’s UNP government had outlawed political activities and was engaging in illegal detainments, enforced disappearances, murders and other physical violences against citizens and regularly made threats against its political opposition, which now included the southern Mothers’ Front (de Mel 2001; Samuel 2006). At the Mothers’ Front’s events, SLFP politicians made regular appearances and gave speeches, often dominating the spotlight during demonstrations and rallies. The group became widely known for their political protests and for their assertive demands against the state’s untruths and abuses, which incorporated Buddhist practices and the regular cursing of UNP politicians, acts that resonated in the Sinhala-Buddhist-dominated south of the country (de Alwis 1998; 2012). The group’s political aims extended beyond searching for their missing children, including an end to the civil war. However, as a number of scholars have documented, once the SLFP-led coalitional government came to power in 1994, the women of the Mothers’ Front largely disbanded, believing that the SLFP, and in particular Kumaratunga, a fellow mother who had suffered a great deal of loss in her own life, would carry their political initiatives forward. Most members sought to go back to their day to day lives, which were burdened by high levels of poverty (de Alwis 1998; 2012; de Mel 2001; Samuel 1998; 2006).

Certainly, Kumaratunga’s government did immediately set to the task of creating official commissions to explore the enforced disappearances and began working to end the war (Samuel 2003; 2006). However, investigating the disappearances was an easy task for the Kumaratunga government since it had been under the SLFP’s long-time political rival, the UNP, that the disappearances had occurred. The UNP had stood little chance of re-election even with its use of threat after the level of violence it used to tamp down the JVP insurrection, which had caught up countless innocent people. While the UNP did have a number of armed groups illegally under its deploy, it was not the same kind of threat that faced the Alfonsín administration in Argentina with the country’s powerful military in the transitioning period (de Mel 2001; Bouvard 1994). The SLFP was more than happy to explore in-depth the atrocities of its predecessors, which only served to make the SLFP more appealing to the electorate by highlighting the UNP’s human rights violations and by making a show of upholding human rights. The SLFP’s role as the opposition to the party in government during the period of the southern Mothers’ Front meant it had every incentive to support the southern Mothers’ Front, which it arguably used almost as a political prop, bringing the women out to make its point to the broader electorate that the UNP government was corrupt and untrustworthy.[[15]](#footnote-15)

The southern Mothers’ Front is a cautionary example of how state-movement alliances can lead to complacency by letting activists feel that their aims have been achieved if the party they have a connection with comes to power. This is particularly true when these activists have been burdened with ongoing economic problems and may have assumed that collective action got them as far as was possible. The counterfactual suggests that a group using political motherhood that had refused a state alliance may have spurred the southern Mothers’ Front on in its efforts. However, in Basu’s recent *Violent Conjunctures in Democratic India* (2015), she found that the Bharatiya Janata Party’s (BJP) rise to government empowered its social movement counterpart of Hindu nationalism. Paradoxically, what led to the empowerment of activists in India led to their downturn in Sri Lanka. This raises a clear need for future research.

*Using political motherhood against the state to unveil the truth: Context matters*

 Political motherhood has been shown to provide the women who use it special advantages that allow their activism to appear above or beyond partisan politics, and allows them the ability to take on the lies and hypocrisies of many regimes, from authoritarian to illiberally or liberally democratic. However, collective action relying on political motherhood presents the women who use it with the same issues facing other civil society groups, mainly whether to engage with state institutions and political parties if they believe these spaces can provide them with increased political maneuverability (Basu 2003; Kantola 2006). These four examples, that of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo under the military dictatorship, the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in the early transition period, the northern Mothers’ Front caught in ethno-nationalist movement that pitted them between a repressive state and a repressive de facto state in the form of the LTTE and finally the southern Mothers’ Front during the JVP insurrection and the state’s violent response, reveal how political contexts, often referred to as political opportunity structures, dictate viable political options for social movement groups based on if and how their agency can be enacted (Meyer 2004; Meyer and Minkoff 2004).

The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo operating in an authoritarian regime represent the logical approach of a united front against a repressive state. The group’s split into two factions during a transitioning democracy, defined as those who wanted to support the fragile democracy and those who thought compromising their political aims to be antidemocratic, represent two strong pulses in movement work more broadly, which remain unresolved (Basu 2003; Kantola 2006). This debate is epitomized by political insiders and outsiders, the former of whom are typically more willing to compromise with the state, while the latter instead hold fast to their often more utopian ideals. I argue that to ensure the healthy functioning democracy, which I measure here by the participation of women and the result of feminist and women-friendly policy outcomes, both aspects of this debate need to be present in civil society as carried out by insiders such as femocrats and double militants as well as by political outsiders who refuse to compromise their values. There need to be civil society groups aligned with political parties and parties in government who, like political insiders, are willing to take a longer vision in the quest to see their policy vision come to fruition. Likewise, those voices who speak from oppositional approaches and choose to forego compromising their political principles are just as necessary. This can be seen readily in the case of the southern Mothers’ Front, which all too trustingly believed that the SLFP would take care of their issues. Incidentally, the SLFP government under Kumaratunga failed in the peace process while Rajapaksa, co-founder of the southern Mothers’ Front, elected in 2005, brought an end to the war in 2009 through ruthless means that included the murders of 40,000 civilians (Oberst et al. 2014). This was not the southern Mothers’ Front’s vision, which sought peaceful solutions to the civil war (Samuel 2006). What might the southern Mothers’ Front have done in holding Rajapaksa accountable during his corrupt, authoritarian-like rule from 2005-2015 if the group had stayed active?

**Conclusion**

Despite increasing attention to social movements in the global South and political systems outside of liberal democracies, the literature on social movement and institutional alliances is biased towards the global North and democratic contexts (Basu 1995). By exploring contested truths in Argentina’s period of state terrorism (1976-1983) and its aftermath and Sri Lanka’s Civil War (1983-2009), specifically through the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo and the Mothers’ Front and their civil society work, which arose in the search for their disappeared children, this paper adds to the literature on state-movement alliances through a unique cross-regional comparison of cases lying outside the global North in authoritarian and illiberally democratic environments. In this paper I have argued that through multiple avenues to participation in democracy, including in state institutions, political parties and social movements, and through the combined efforts of political insiders and outsiders, democracy is strengthened by the messy, overlapping and complicated work of various strands of civil society and government working both in tandem and against one another. Political motherhood can contribute to strengthening democracy by giving the activists who deploy it maneuverability in many difficult political environments, although as evidenced in the northern Mothers’ Front, not all difficult political environments. However, in democratic contexts, including illiberal democratic contexts, some women align with parties and work closely with governments while others remain autonomous and oppositional towards the state, as was the case of the combined civil society work by the Founding Line and the Association of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo. Political motherhood is an important avenue to increasing democratic inclusivity, but like all forms of participation, it is limited by political opportunity structures. This points to the need acknowledge what political motherhood is capable of, and that it is not political motherhood itself, which prevents women’s effective political participation as many feminists have argued.

**References**

de Alwis, Malathi. 1998. “Motherhood as a Space of Protest: Women’s Political Participation in Contemporary Sri Lanka.” In *Appropriating Gender: Women’s Activism and Politicized Religion in South Asia,* Patricia Jeffery and Amrita Basu, eds. New York: Routledge, 185-202.

de Alwis, Malathi. 2012. “Feminist Politics and Maternal Activism.” In *South Asian Feminisms*, Ania Loomba and Ritty A. Lukose, eds. Durham: Duke University Press.

Basu, Amrita. 1995. “Introduction.” In *The Challenge of Local Feminisms: Women’s Movements in a Global Perspective,* Amrita Basu, ed, Boulder: Westwood Press, 1-21.

Basu, Amrita. 2003. “Gender and Governance: Concepts and Contexts.” In *Essays on Gender and Governance*. Human Development Resource Centre. United Nations Development Programme India. New Delhi: Impression Communications, 20-58.

Basu, Amrita. 2015. *Violent Conjunctures in Democratic India*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bouvard, Marguerite Guzman. 1994. *Revolutionizing Motherhood: The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo.* Wilmington, DE: SR Books.

Chaney, Elsa. 1979. *Supermadre: Women in Politics in Latin America*. Austin: Published for Institute of Latin American Studies by University of Texas Press.

*Commissions of Inquiry*. 1995. Commissions of Inquiry: Commissions of Inquiry into the Involuntary Removal or Disappearance of Persons. Accessed 3 August 2017. <https://www.usip.org/publications/1995/01/commissions-inquiry-sri-lanka>.

Cosgrove, Serena. 2010. *Leadership from the Margins: Women and Civil Society Organizations in Argentina, Chile, and El Salvador.* New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Dietz, Mary G. 1985. “Citizenship with a Feminist Face: The Problem with Maternal Thinking.”
*Political Theory.* 13.1: 19-37

DiQuinzio, Patrice. 1993. “Exclusion and Essentialism in Feminist Theory: The Problem of Mothering.” *Hypatia*. 8.3: 1-20.

Fernando, Basil. 2010. “From Manorani Saravanamuttu to Sandya Eknaliyagoda.” *Sri Lanka Guardian*. Accessed 6 August 2017. <http://www.srilankaguardian.org/2010/02/from-manorani-saravanamuttu-to-sandya.html>

Franzway, Suzanne and Dianne Court, R.W. Connell. 1989. *Staking a Claim: Feminism, Bureaucracy and the State*. Sydney, Wellington, London, Boston: Allen & Urwin.

Hawkesworth, Mary. 2012. *Political Worlds of Women: Activism, Advocacy, and Governance in the Twenty-First Century*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Howe, Sara Eleanor. 2006. “The Madres de la Plaza de Mayo: Asserting Motherhood; Rejecting Feminism?” *Journal of International Women's Studies*. 7.3. Stable URL: <http://www.bridgew.edu/SoAS/jiws/>.

*ICG*. 2007. “Policy Report: Sri Lanka: Sinhala Nationalism and the Elusive Southern Consensus.” *International Crisis Group*. 7 November 2007. Asia Report N\*141.

*IPU*. 2017. “Women in Politics: 2017.” Inter-Parliamentary Union. Accessed 11 June 2017. <https://beta.ipu.org/resources/publications/infographics/2017-03/women-in-politics-2017?utm_source=Inter-Parliamentary+Union+%28IPU%29&utm_campaign=550dedbec7-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2017_02_23&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_d1ccee59b3-550dedbec7-258891957>.

Kantola, Johanna. 2006. “Feminism,” in *The State: Theories and Issues*, eds. Colin Hay, Michael Lister and David Marsh, 118-134. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Kriesi, Hanspeter. 2014. “Social Movements.” In *Comparative Politics, 3rd edition.* Daniele Caramani, ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 267-283.

Kunovich, Sheri L. and Pamela Paxton. 2005. “Pathways to Power: The Role of Political Parties in Women’s National Political Representation.” *American Journal of Sociology.* 111.2: 505-552.

Maunaguru, Sitralega. 2009. “Gendering Tamil Nationalism: The Construction of ‘Woman’ in Projects of Protest and Control,” In *Unmaking the Nation: The Politics of Identity and History in Modern Sri Lanka,* eds. Pradeep Jeganathan and Qadri Ismail. Colombo, Sri Lanka: Social Scientists’ Association and New York: South Focus Press, 157-173.

McCammon, Holly J. and Karen E. Campbell. 2001. “Winning the Vote in the West: The Political Successes of the Women's Suffrage Movements, 1866-1919.” *Gender and Society*. 15.1: 55-82.

de Mel, Neloufer. 2001. *Women and the Nation’s Narrative: Gender and Nationalism in Twentieth Century Sri Lanka.* New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

de Mel, Neloufer. 2003. “Agent or Victim? The Sri Lankan Woman Militant in the Interregnum.” In *Feminists Under Fire: Exchanges Across War Zones,* Wenona Giles, Malathi de Alwis, Edith Klein, Neluka Silva (co-editors) with Maja Korac, Djurdja Knezevic, Zarana Papic (advisory editors), eds. Toronto: Between the Lines, 55-73.

Meyer, David. 2004. “Protest and Political Opportunities.” *Annual Review of Sociology*. 30: 125-145.

Meyer, David and Debra Minkoff. 2004. “Conceptualizing Political Opportunity.” *Social Forces*. 82.4: 1457-1492.

Mhajne, Anwar and Crystal Whetstone. 2018. “The Use of Political Motherhood in Egypt’s Arab Spring Uprising and Aftermath.” *International Feminist Journal of Politics*. 20.1: 54-68.

Navarro, Marysa. 2001. “The Personal is Political: Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo.” In *Power and Popular Protest: Latin American Social Movements, Updated and Expanded Edition*, ed. Susan Eckstein, 241-258. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Noonan, Rita K. 1995. “Women against the State: Political Opportunities and Collective Action Frames in Chile's Transition to Democracy.” *Sociological Forum.* 10.1: 81-111.

Oberst, Robert C., Yogendra K. Malik, Charles Kennedy, and Ashok Kapur. 2014. *Government and Politics in South Asia, 7th edition*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Orleck, Annelise. 1997. “Introduction: Tradition Unbound: Radical Mothers in International Perspective.” In *The Politics of Motherhood: Activist Voices from Left to Right*. Edited by Alexis Jetter, Annelise Orleck and Diana Taylor. Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 3-20.

Piven, Frances Fox and Richard Cloward. 1977. *Poor People's Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail*. New York: Pantheon Books.

Samuel, Kumudini. 1998. “Gender Difference in Conflict Resolution: The Case of Sri Lanka.” *Options*. 14.2: 8-16.

Samuel, Kumudini. 2003. “Activism, Motherhood, and the State in Sri Lanka’s Ethnic Conflict.” In *Feminists Under Fire: Exchange across War Zones,* eds. Wenona Giles, Malathi de Alwis, Edith Klein and Neluka Silva (co-editors) with Maja Korač, Djurdja Knežević and Žarana Papić (advisory editors). Toronto, Canada: Between the Lines: 167-179.

Samuel, Kumudini. 2006. *A Hidden History: Women’s Activism for Peace in Sri Lanka, 1982-2002*. Homagama, Sri Lanka: Karunaratne & Sons Ltd.

*Saturday Review*. 1984a. “Jaffna Mothers Say: Release Hostages.” No Author. Vol. 3. No. 23. 25th August 1984. Front page and p. 12.

*Saturday Review*. 1984b. “Broomstick March By Jaffna Women!” Vol 3. No 17. 9th June 1984. Front page and p. 12.

*Sri Lanka Brief*. 2018. “The Political Crisis in Sri Lanka Will Likely End in a Reconfiguration of Coalition Forces.” 5 February 2018. Jayadeva Uyangoda. Accessed 3 March 2018. <http://srilankabrief.org/2018/02/the-political-crisis-in-sri-lanka-will-likely-end-in-a-reconfiguration-of-coalition-forces/>.

Swerdlow, Amy. 1990. “Motherhood and the Subversion of the Military State: Women Strike for Peace Confronts the House Committee on Un-American Activities.” In *Women, Militarism, and War: Essays in History, Politics, and Social Theory,* eds. Jean Bethke Elshtain and Sheila Tobias, 7-28. Savage, Maryland: Bowman and Littlefield.

Taylor, Diana. 1997. “Making a Spectacle: The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo.” In *The Politics of Motherhood: Activist Voices from Left to Right*, edited by Alexis Jetter, Annelise Orleck and Diana Taylor. Hanover: University Press of New England, 182-196.

Thiranagama, Sharika. 2011. *In My Mother’s House: Civil War in Sri Lanka*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press

Thiruchandran, Selvy. 2012. *Women’s Movement in Sri Lanka: History, Trends and Trajectories.* Social Scientists’ Association. Colombo, SL.

Tripp, Aili Mari. 2006. "Why So Slow? The Challenges of Gendering Comparative Politics." *Politics & Gender*. 2.2: 249-263.

Wu, Judy Tzu-Chun. 2013. *Radicals on the Road: Internationalism, Orientalism, and Feminism during the Vietnam War*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

1. This paper is based on my larger dissertation project *Nurturing Democracy through Political Motherhood (w/t)*. I want to thank and acknowledge my advisor Dr. Rina Verma Williams for her support, guidance and expertise as I complete this project and related works, and I thank the rest of my committee including Dr. Anne Sisson Runyan, Dr. Laura Dudley Jenkins and Dr. Amy Lind, for their guidance and support. I also extend my deep gratitude to Dr. John Rogers and Dr. Vagisha Gunasekara of the American Institute for Sri Lankan Studies, whose generous financial and institutional support allowed me to gather many of the resources for this project. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The exception was the northern Mothers’ Front, which formed in an ethnic conflict and warzone, so its members were well aware of the political exigencies faced by the Tamil community, an issue I delve into below (Saturday Review 1984; Maunaguru 2009; Thiruchandran 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The majority Sinhala community is approximately 70% of the population, while the minority communities of the Tamils and Muslims are about 12% and 7% respectively. Both the Muslim and Tamil communities speak Tamil. However, the Muslim community does not identity with the Tamil community, which is composed mainly of practitioners of Hinduism. The civil war was mainly between the Sinhala and Tamil communities but by the 1990s, the Muslim community was involved after a major expulsion of Muslims from the north by the Tamil armed group the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (Oberst, Malik, Kennedy, and Kapur 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Under British colonial rule, the colonial administrators favored the minority Tamil community for jobs and education over the majority Sinhala community (ICG 2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. There is widespread discrepancy over how many were disappeared and murdered during the VJP insurrection and the state’s violent response to the insurrection, known widely as the reign of terror (de Mel 2001). The official *Commissions of Inquiry: Commissions of Inquiry into the Involuntary Removal or Disappearance of Persons* reports acknowledged over 15,000 disappearances (Commissions of Inquiry 1995). However, journalists and scholars have suggested that a truer accounting of the disappeared could be as high as 40,000 disappearances (Gunaratna 1990; de Mel 2001). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Outlining feminist/women friendly policy outcomes is an issue unto itself, which lies beyond the scope of this paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Since 2003, the Argentine government has been pursuing holding the remaining junta members accountable via state level trials (Sutton 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. In 1971, the Sri Lankan constitution was amended to change the head of government from prime minister to president through the creation of a strong executive that many have argued has since contributed to the authoritarian streak of many of Sri Lanka’s presidents, most notably the Mothers’ Front co-founder Rajapaksa (ICG 2007; Oberst et al. 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Kumaratunga’s government received substantial criticism for engaging with the LTTE and for making an offer to devolve power from the center toward the Tamil community. The LTTE in turn was insulted for being given what it perceived to be limited capabilities by the government during negotiations. The talks fell apart after only four months (Oberst et al. 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Some women, particularly in the town of Matara, elected to continue working with the SLFP at the local level (de Mel 2001). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Argentina’s second post-transition, democratically elected president. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Notably, there were two military insurrections that Alfonsín’s government had to put down during his first and only term in office, which he in part outmaneuvered by making major concessions to the military in holding them accountable for their crimes against humanity during the dictatorship (Taylor 1997). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. In the aftermath of the LTTE defeat in May 2009, the state has continued many such repressive measures in various forms such as the appointment of the Sinhala-dominated military to post-war reconstruction efforts (Oberst et al. 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. The situation in Sri Lanka today remains protracted despite the end of Rajapaksa’s widely condemned authoritarian/ authoritarian-esque government (2005-2015) and the start of Maithripala Sirisena’s government (2015-present), which has made promises to resolve the ongoing societal conflict between the majority Sinhala community and minority Tamil community, including through constitutional reform (ICG 2007; Sri Lanka Brief 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Premadasa was killed by a suicide bomber in 1993 and replaced temporarily by another UNP official until the next elections. His murder was celebrated by members of the Mothers’ Front who held him responsible for the disappearances and murders of their children (de Alwis 1998; 2012; de Mel 2001). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)