retical premises. Despite its potential, the Madres’ approach also imposed some limits that became much clearer once democratic institutions were again in place. The Madres were institutionally weak; they relied heavily on strong personal leadership and were held together by gender solidarity, not organizational sophistication. This has historically been the case with women’s organizations and with other social movements, but these characteristics mean that the Madres were more prepared to respond to a crisis than to institutionalize a durable model of participation.

The Housewives’ Organization

Between October and December 1982, surprisingly strong urban protests spread through greater Buenos Aires, set off by an increase in the cost of living. These protests, known as vecinazos, involved a high level of feminine participation: Housewives’ committees called for or joined the protests that took place in the different municipalities surrounding Buenos Aires and took the lead in negotiating with local government authorities.

Although they became visible during the vecinazos, housewives had protested before. In the months preceding the neighborhood demonstrations, women had boycotted products and participated in demonstrations against the poor quality of life throughout the country. In July 1982, the national movement of housewives was born in a middle-class neighborhood in the district of San Martín (part of greater Buenos Aires). Women, who had mobilized spontaneously against price hikes by launching the Don’t Buy on Thursdays campaign, rapidly generated unprecedented hopes among the public.

Little research has been done on social organizations at the neighborhood level in Argentina, much less on the struggles over consumption and other issues related to the reproduction of the family. Despite the lack of knowledge, we can clearly see some new characteristics. In the past, protests headed by women were linked to political parties, to the Church, or to certain sectors of the Right who tried to improve women’s lives through charity. The movement of the housewives that emerged during the Argentine transition brought together women who had worked in neighborhood organizations but who had little experience with broader political currents. The National Movement of Housewives, a new political actor in the fight against poverty, began by distancing itself from both politics and the traditional activities of women: “Our movement is not one of women who have extra time for charitable activities.”

As in the case of the Madres of the Plaza de Mayo, the housewives insisted on making it clear that the movement did not follow a particular political agenda or ideological approach. The housewives’ movement supported other causes, such as the expression of solidarity with Nobel Peace laureate Adolfo Pérez Esquivel and the Madres and Abuelas of the Plaza de Mayo. Despite this capacity to innovate, they remained faithful to a vicarious definition of women’s participation and jus-
tified their actions as consistent with their roles as wives and mothers. Their slogan, “Our policy is that of our husbands’ wallets,” clearly subordinated gender.

The Feminists

The majority of the feminist groups that had emerged in the early 1970s were dissolved after the military coup of 1976. The Argentine Feminist Union (Unión Feminista de Argentina), the Feminist Liberation Movement (Movimiento para la Liberación Feminista), and the Association for the Liberation of Argentine Women (Asociación para la Liberación de la Mujer Argentina) ceased their activities at that point, as did (temporarily) the Front for Women’s Rights (Movimiento para Liberación Feminina, or MLF), an umbrella organization of feminist groups and women from the political parties that had formed in 1975. Others continued to exist. CESMA (Center for the Social Study of Argentine Women, or Centro de Estudios de la Mujer Argentina) was created in 1974 by a group of women members of FIP (Popular Leftist Front, or Frente de la Izquierda Popular), who began to meet outside the party to discuss their situation as women in the party ranks. Although most of them left the party in 1976, CESMA remained active. Most of its members believed in “double militancy,” that parallel work in parties and in the feminist movement is possible. Their goal was to contribute to the formation of a great national feminist movement, deeply rooted in their people, which would encompass the majority of the women in Argentina and strive for women’s dignity, freedom, and justice.

Women from the National Current of FIP and women without political affiliations created the Association of Argentine Women (Asociación de Mujeres Argentinas, or AMA) in 1977 to read and discuss material on discrimination and to exchange personal experiences. They soon connected with other groups and changed their name to the Alfonsina Storni Women’s Association (Asociación de Mujeres Alfonsina Storni, or AMAS). This group expressed its goals in its platform, approved in 1978: to unify women to improve their status, to increase all feminine participation in economic development, and to preserve peace. Toward these goals AMAS issued a newsletter, organized conferences, and showed films.

In Cordoba, a very active group, the Juana Manso Association (Asociación Juana Manso), was organized in 1978 and sponsored numerous outreach and debate activities. The Union of Socialist Women (Unión de Mujeres Socialistas), more closely related to mainstream politics, formed in 1979. It was linked to the Argentine Socialist Confederation ( Confederación Socialista de Argentina). Its president, Alicia Moreau de Justo, took the bold step of calling for the restoration of judicial rights in Argentina. In 1981, the MLF was reorganized under the leadership of veteran feminist María Elena Oddone and called itself the Argentine Feminist Organization (Organización Feminista Argentina, or OFA). Once the political opening occurred, the OFA set out to lobby political parties to ensure that party platforms incorporated women’s demands. Earlier, several feminists had constituted a committee to reform custody rights under the law of patria potestad.
In April 1982, the ATEM November 25 (Asociación para el Trabajo y el Estudio de la Mujer November 25, Association for the Work and Study of Women) emerged as an autonomous movement with the goal of "contributing to the creation of a democratic society, a world of equals, where the differences among human beings do not become an excuse for oppression, but a basis for the respect for the plurality of life." It was made up of "women of different ages, educational levels, and economic backgrounds." Among its specific goals were the organization of campaigns, seminars, and presentations to achieve Argentine compliance with the 1980 UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

In August 1983, the Women's Place (Lugar de la Mujer) opened its doors in Buenos Aires. Lacking ideological consensus, the women of Lugar de la Mujer defined it as a civil association "with feminist orientation." Lugar de la Mujer offers a space for activities centered around feminist themes (roundtables, workshops, study groups) and offers legal, sexual, and psychological advice to women.

Two months later, a Tribunal of Violence Against Women was constituted on the initiative of the three Argentine feminist organizations. The entity, whose stated goal was to alert the population to the violence exercised against women, organized a demonstration asking for justice in a rape case that had recently shocked the public.

**The Transition**

These separate yet converging efforts helped create a climate of opinion that showed, perhaps for the first time in Argentine history, the inescapable need to incorporate women into the process of democratization. Sensitive to the potential voting power of women, each of the parties rushed to constitute its own women's front. This produced the first modern women's sectors within the party structures, following the much earlier lead of the Peronists who had created the Feminine Peronist Party (Partido Feminista) as an autonomous section within the party in the late 1940s. Public recognition of the demands of women occurred at different institutional levels. At the party level, the positive response to feminist issues was not a disinterested act of long overdue justice but an effort to win the women's vote in a close electoral race. This was visible in the parties' appropriation of the most important slogans of the women's movement. "We are life," which the Madres had used, became the leitmotiv of the Unión Cívica Radical when Raúl Alfonsin campaigned against the Peronists and the Right in 1983.

Women candidates were often put on the presidential ticket of the smaller parties, though care was taken to ensure that these women would be one level below the men. For example, Elisa Colombo was the vice-presidential candidate for the Popular Leftist Front, and Catalina Guagnini occupied the same position in the Worker's Party (Partido Obrero) ticket, as did Irene Rodriguez for the Communist Party.
The Argentine political consensus seems to be that the term "feminism" turns voters off, but little by little the feminist agenda is having an impact on political party platforms and on the mass media. This is less surprising than it might seem. In greater Buenos Aires, if not in the more depressed rural areas of Argentina, women have been consistently active in the educational system and in the economy. They are predisposed to change their attitudes and behavior. Feminist activists at first only speculated that women's issues would gain support. This was later verified by electoral results.

Later, Alfonsin's striking success in winning women's votes would prove the success of an electoral strategy based on the expectations and hopes of the feminine electorate. His intelligent and daring message not only raised heretofore dormant demands but also used women-sensitive language to the point that his closing campaign speech openly criticized machismo. When men name these themes, women's issues are pulled out of the shadows of women's groups and placed in the strong light of the public arena. Issues such as divorce, shared patria potestad, and the defense of peace were repeatedly raised by the two most prominent candidates being elected. This gained new visibility for women's issues and enhanced women's citizenship.

In part because of their party's machista traditions, the political leaders did not follow through after the election. Politicians cannot move easily beyond rhetoric; they do not understand women except in their role as voters. When the time comes for proposals, all candidates recycle old ideas. They want to "improve women's condition," which translated into the protectionist models of the past, models that would reinforce the traditional role of women in Argentine society. Supporting the participation of women as true protagonists of political life creates competition inside the parties. It requires redesigning Argentina's social map. These are radical goals and so far they have found little practical space.

Throughout this process of politicization, women's groups have added new interests to the old rather than differentiating among them. This consensus-building strategy is symbolized politically by the approach of the Women's Multisectorial (El Multisectorial de Mujeres). Five decades of alternating between civilian and military government had paralyzed the capacity for exchange among different social groups. But the patterns of participation during the transition showed that the conditions exist to represent women's interests in diverse mediums including the trade unions, traditionally the domain of men, and in the fields of scientific investigation and the arts, where women became active and visible at levels unheard of in the past.

The Women's Multisectorial was organized on March 8, 1984, the day when International Women's Day was celebrated for the first time in Argentina. It laid out an ambitious program of demands, confident that women could be mobilized for political action. The transition began with a series of promising signals, including the cooperation among women's organizations and human rights groups. In the summer of 1984, it seemed that a substantial transformation could take place if