



# GIRL, DID YOU GET HOME SAFELY?

CARE AND SAFETY FOR WOMEN IN PROTESTS  
IN LATIN AMERICA





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ARTIGO 19

#LIVREPARAPROTESTAR





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## **THE CAMPAIGN** **#LIVREPARAPROTESTAR**

The #LivreParaProtestar campaign (#FREETOPROTEST) discusses the importance of the right to protest and warns about limitations to this right that are advancing in Brazil, considering its relationship with freedom of expression, democracy and defending rights. It is an initiative by ARTIGO 19, allied with several organizations involved in the theme, that have come together to provoke discussions and reflections on the right to safely protest in Brazil.

## **RESEARCH ON** **FEMINIST PROTESTS**

As part of the campaign on the right to protest, the present study was carried out as a means to create an analytical background aiming to raise awareness about the importance of reflecting on protection mechanisms for women who are directly harmed by state repression and also by violence from within their communities.

This research was organized, therefore, aiming to analyze the context of authoritarian restrictions advancing over the right to protest and to understand the challenges and new forms of organization of the feminist agenda, by shedding a light on public demonstrations and protests led by women.





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## INTRODUCTION

*“We have learned to mobilize without depending on men. To organize our columns, to organize ourselves on the streets and to take care of ourselves. We are beginning to understand what self-care is. That we didn’t have to depend on men or the police. That we could take care of each other and create our own strategies”.*

**(Sofia, Argentine activist)**

“Girl, did you get home safely?” It is a common question among women after a demonstration is dispersed. The questioning is a feminist tactic of care and affection, but it also reveals a disturbing doubt: the uncertainty on whether, actually, your partner has arrived home. Women know that the possibility of not arriving is real.

Result of qualitative research that interviewed Argentine, Brazilian and Chilean women, this article brings a preliminary study that identifies key themes on care and safety of women in protests in Latin America. This work has two main objectives: (1) to identify the main challenges, risks and vulnerabilities that different types of women have in protest contexts; and (2) to point out care strategies that activists have developed to mitigate such challenges.

Female bodies face risks that male bodies do not encounter. Johansson-Nogués (2013), when discussing the insecurity of women in the acts of the Arab Spring, comments that the protesters suffered double violence: the brutality of repression, experienced by all, and the attacks to honour and body integrity. Also, in contexts of struggles, insurgencies and conflict, the prevailing imaginary in many places is still the one exalting the traits of hegemonic masculinity: the radicalized images of the “virile super macho” (Johansson-Nogués, 2013).

Breaking with this model, Latin American activists prefer to use the term care (*cuidado*) instead of safety/security (*segurança*). Care “designates a type of activity that includes everything we do to maintain, preserve and repair our world so that we can live in it the best possible way. This world comprises our bodies, what each of us is as a person, our environment, everything we seek to weave together in a dense and complex network whose purpose is to maintain life” (Tronto, 2009, p. 143). Activists claim that the feminist language needs to prevail over the militarized one and, thus, they also reaffirm that, through care, they weave a safety network between women.

This article starts from three basic points about care in the context of protests carried out by women. First, it is not possible to separate the risk of protests from the structural violence to which women are subjected living in patriarchal societies marked by high rates of femicide. The protest, therefore, is a sphere that does not create a new danger but exacerbates and enhances patriarchal and state violence. Thus, as safety and gender studies have already identified (see, for example, Alison 2004), the danger is not always from



a distant and stereotyped enemy embodied in the figure of the super male who invades a demonstration, it also comes from militancy pairs and the family itself.

Second, it is necessary to speak of women in the plural. The idea of representing a “woman” in the singular is a result of a colonial hegemonic universalization. There are women with different bodies, needs, vulnerabilities and differentiation markers. Black, trans, disabled, indigenous bodies; bodies located in large cities or small villages; young and old bodies: each of them pose different risks and demand different strategies.

Finally, the topic of care in protests needs to be analyzed holistically, as Auyero and Joe (2003) drew attention to in an important book on biographies of Argentine women in protests: the protection and experience of protests are forged before and after the streets; there is a continuity between life stories (with specific daily roles) and experiences in contentious episodes. The protest itself may be considered the least dangerous moment for many women, precisely because on the streets they do not march alone. The demonstrations are part of a continuum between the streets, the house, the neighbourhood, the school, involving the organization of the trip, occupying the space, the dispersion and also the developments on social networks.



## METHODOLOGICAL NOTE



This research was conducted in three stages between August 20th, 2020 and January 20th, 2021. In the first stage, a six-hour workshop was organized with experts, who held an in-depth debate to identify the main challenges faced by women in protests. Intellectuals and activists from Brazil, Argentina and Chile participated in the workshop.

The main points raised in the workshop discussions became the basis for the interview script. A bibliographic review was also carried out on the databases of Scopus, Google Scholar and the library of the University of Bath (United Kingdom), focusing on the keywords “women” and/or “security” and/or “protests/demonstrations”. The research found few occurrences on the subject, which highlights the gap in the academic literature and the importance of this preliminary study to launch new questions to this field.

In the third stage, interviews were conducted with protesters with a semi-structured script of ten questions. The recruitment criterion used “snowball” and “intentional” techniques. At first, the workshop participants themselves indicated participants for the interview. Subsequently, an announcement was made on social networks to recruit volunteers. In total, six semi-structured interviews were conducted via WhatsApp or ZOOM with two participants from Chile, two from Argentina and two from Brazil. The selection

criteria for the interviews in each country incorporated voices specialized in protest organization (03 interviewees) and women safety, but also more “common” protesters (03 interviewees). This differentiation allowed us to collect different impressions and perspectives both from people actively involved in the safety issue and from people who never dedicated themselves to reflect on the issue, but whose personal or family experiences were crossed by the theme. The interviewees, whose names are fictitious, were:

- Amanda, 24 years old, autonomist activist, São Paulo, Brazil
- Marcela, 40 years old, a university professor from Fortaleza, but a resident of Santa Maria, Brazil
- Sofía, 38 years old, coordinator of the security committee of the campaign protests for the right to abortion in Buenos Aires, Argentina
- Florencia, 41 years old, Argentine journalist who frequently attends demonstrations, but does not consider herself an activist
- María, 43 years old, feminist lawyer in Santiago, Chile.
- Ana, 40 years old, an activist of the cyclists’ movement in Santiago, Chile.

In a less structured and in-depth way, two other women were also specifically consulted, such as Helena Vieira, 28 years old, Brazilian intellectual and transactivist. Finally, the interviewees shared news stories about risks, episodes of violence and protective measures in protests.



## **WHITE AND GREEN SCARVES: CONTEXTUALIZING WOMEN'S GENERATIONS ON THE STREETS**

**F**rom microscopic resistance to major demonstrations, to union and party organization, women have always protested against structures of sexist domination and violence. However, in the years 2010, there was a new wave of protests. On the one hand, we see anti-capitalist and anti-authoritarian demonstrations and occupations, from the Arab Spring to Occupy Wall Street and to June 2013<sup>1</sup>. On the other hand, it is possible to notice that there was, almost at the same time, a boom in feminist and/or female-led struggles in the most varied parts of the globe (Pinheiro-Machado, 2019).

In Latin America, in particular, the explosion of feminist movements is a unique mass phenomenon. Feminist collectives and organizations multiply in schools, communities and workplaces in a transversal movement. Schools have been occupied by youngsters in Argentina, Brazil and Chile. Millions of women have taken to the streets in feminist and/

<sup>1</sup> The “June Journeys in 2013” or simply “June 2013” were a sequence of protests that took place all over Brazil, calling for more public goods, such as reducing bus fares in Porto Alegre and São Paulo, and against corruption.

or women's acts, forming what in Argentina it's been called the tide: "the micropolitics that is beginning to find its way in macropolitics" (Palmeiro, 2018).

Recognizing that there is a new generation of women who take to the streets and protest doesn't mean, in any way, to ignore the profoundly transgenerational experience of women's demonstrations. All the interviewees emphasized that women have always vigorously protested in Latin America and that, therefore, there is a solid tradition that produces street experience. In Brazil, transgenerationality appears very strongly in the statements of black women, in which the importance of "older women" is an organizing principle for struggles, demonstrations and care. About Argentina, Sofia<sup>2</sup> comments: "we have a long history in the feminist movement. For more than 30 years we have held our national women's meetings. This leads to new generations of girls beginning to recognize their rights".

In Argentina, women in their 40s find themselves in an intermediate generation between the Mothers and Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo and the pibas — an expression that designates young women activists in the country. Florencia compared the experience of her teenage daughter on the streets nowadays with a mixture of an explosion, protest and celebration, remembering that her 40-year-old generation grew up with the Mothers of and Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo. Sofia, when reflecting on her role as a care coordinator in demonstrations, comments that, at 38 years of age, she is "an intermediate generation because there are the historical

<sup>2</sup> All of the interviewees' names were replaced by fictitious names to protect anonymity.

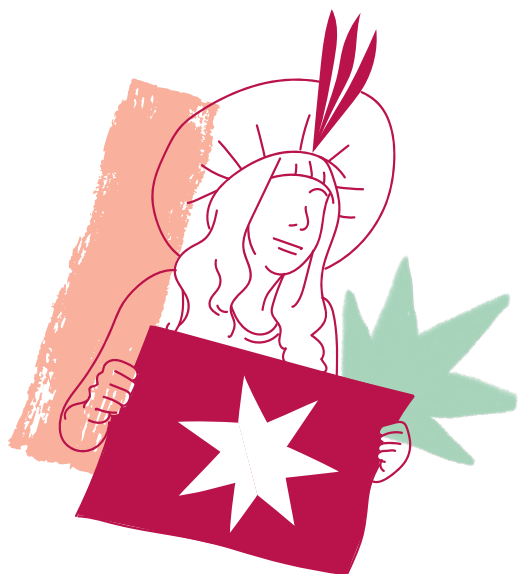
ones, the older women, then the younger in their 20s, who are clearly not the ones that organize themselves, but have a very strong presence on the streets”.

Ana observes two key moments for the boom in Chilean young feminism. The milestone was 2011 with student mobilizations, of which even emerged two deputies, Camila Vallejo and Karol Cariola from the Communist Party. In her perception as an activist, she risks saying that there has been a considerable growth in the past five years, which has resulted in the impressive number of young women, even underage, who took to the streets in the Chilean 8M 2019, possibly leading to the emergence of yet another wave of feminists.

In Argentina, two moments were very important to strengthen the green tide and bring new actors to the streets. The first was with the protests Ni Una Menos against femicide in the years 2015 and 2016. The second moment was the vote on abortion in 2018. In these protests, new generations of young women — the pibas — started to emerge, holding vigils and occupying schools during the voting, being the great protagonists of the “green tide” (Palmeiro, 2018). In Brazil, it’s possible to say that the high school occupations of 2016, across approximately 1200 schools throughout the country, constituted a milestone for a new generation of girl activists who are leading protests for the lives of women and against authoritarianism in all its forms, fixing the slogan “fight like a girl” that came to mark a new generation (see Alegria, 2018; Campos, 2016).

María and Sofia believe that, in the three countries, the issue of sexual and reproductive rights is an

important symbolic landmark to understand the boom of new generations, who now feel free to speak and express themselves on this and other topics, even with the violent reaction of religious, conservative and far-right movements. In Brazil, the flourishing of the feminist spring on the streets and in the networks was directly linked to PL5069, a bill that planned to reverse access to legal abortion in the country in 2015. In Argentina, the “green tide” for #AbortoYá in 2018 took millions of young women to the streets holding vigils, resulting in the arduous achievement of passing the law in January 2020. Beyond the streets, the struggle of young women for abortion in Argentina is also intertwined with many school occupations, calling for sex education and also greater budget and infrastructure in the institutions.



María, when referring to the Chilean case, but not only, believes that there is a new direction for women whose struggles are much more anchored over the memory of territorial and collective struggles, connecting anti-racist, anti-prison system and socio-environmental feminism in a kind of peoples' feminism, linking territory and community. These women claim historical demands through the occupation of public space: whether in the squares of urban areas or the countryside,



in rural areas. There is a reappropriation of the body and the public space as a locus of protest.

Regarding the body, the performative character of the new generations draws attention. The high school Brazilian occupations in 2016 were massively led by women who used their bodies and school materials to carry out performances ranging from collective games to street occupations with tables and school chairs. María points out that these forms of manifestation are not necessarily new, but have gained new definitions in recent years. Between performance, revolt and care, the visibility of the performance *A rapist on your way* (*Un violador en tu camiño*), from 2019, made it possible for women to “situate and universalize a pain, a structural violence against women, in the dissidents and the girls that, in this sense, we all share but that each one, we could say, remembers and updates, relating to one’s own historical and material conditions and, so to speak, also territorial”. The performance *A rapist on your way* has been adapted to several parts of the world.

To recognise that there is a new generation of very young women who are leading protests is going back to this article’s central theme — safety. What street experience do these girls have? How are they preparing to deal with the violence they are subjected to by exposing their bodies on the streets? The answer to this question is complex and involves transgenerationality. Palmeiro (2018) remembers the image that circulated widely on social networks with the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo with their traditional white scarf and the pibas with their green scarf<sup>3</sup>. Sofia says that “we are all acquiring that in practice. In our country, the younger girls who occupy their schools for their rights organize themselves and learn




self-care strategies”. Ana agrees that the Chilean occupations are a moment when they gain experience. Care, therefore, does not depend on age, but on the meeting of bodies in a collective alliance.

The intergenerational issue is key. There is unanimous recognition among the interviewees about the importance of creating and transmitting care tactics between different generations. At the individual level, Florencia reflects on her learning from the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo and how much she tries to teach her teenage daughter simple things, such as not leaving home, for instance, without having a charged cell phone battery. Black activists in Brazil tend to emphasize the importance of older women in teaching protective measures on the streets and in protests, such as walking in groups and never leaving home without an identity card, assuming that black women are never safe in public spaces, as Amanda pointed out, and this is passed down from generation to generation in a chain of matriarchal care.

In addition to top-down teaching, there is also the other way around. The boldness of the *pibas*, while occupying schools during the vote for the abortion bill in Argentina in 2018, also educated their teachers and Argentine society as a whole (Palmeiro, 2018). Marcela reflected on her mother, who, at the age of 65, started attending street demonstrations in Fortaleza (Brazil). As the mother teaches her daughter that “women never walk alone”, she learns from her feminist daughter how to dress for the protest, such as putting on

3 The white handkerchiefs symbolize the diapers of the children lost during the military dictatorship in Argentina. The green scarf represents the current feminist tide and, to a large extent, honors the women who succeeded them.



Marcela also reflects about the mothers and grandmothers of her students from the city of Santa Maria, in the interior of Rio Grande do Sul (Brazil), who, together with their granddaughters and daughters, first took to the streets during the protests of #EleNãO, standing against the authoritarianism of Jair Bolsonaro. The older ones learned from the young women that they should beware of assaults from Bolsonaro supporters in the region.

In the generational aspect, the Brazilian context has a particularity: there is an explosive rupture of ordinary women, non-activists and even non-feminists who have taken to the streets in recent years. It is evident that there has been a tradition of protests by peasant, black and indigenous women for many years — the March of Black Women <sup>4</sup>, the March of Indigenous Women <sup>5</sup> and the March of the Daisies<sup>6</sup> are paradigmatic examples — but after the feminist spring and high school occupations, #EleNãO was the largest women-led demonstration in Brazil's history, taking millions of women to the streets for the first time. As previously mentioned, not infrequently grandmothers, mothers and granddaughters marched together, in a process of politicization that takes place on the streets. Evidently, this kind of phenomenon raises again the issue of safety on the streets, since they are women who, unlike their organized or experienced Chilean and Argentine sisters, have little or no experience in protests. Marcela believes that many of these women, who had never even spoken of politics before #EleNãO, took to the streets

4 The March of Black Women (Marcha das Mulheres Negras) began in 2015 against Racism, Violence and for the Well-Being.

5 The March of Indigenous Women (Marcha das Mulheres Indígenas) began in 2018.

6 The March of the Daisies (Marcha das Margaridas) is a demonstration of rural workers that takes place annually on August 12th since 2000.

without reflecting on self-care measures. The experience of these women on the streets is a decisive factor in advancing or not their politicization processes.

### BEFORE PROTESTS: PRIOR ORGANIZATION



**P**lanning for the safety of women's protests requires extensive prior organization. The success of the Argentine and Chilean case lies in the transversality of feminism, which manages to promote dialogue in the plurality of streets, between autonomous women and those organized in unions and parties.

Sofia is one of the people aiming to organize the streets in Argentina. She serves on the self-care committee organizing the national campaign for the right to abortion, along with marches and vigils, having experience in organizing mass events, such as those that take place on March 8th, International Women's Day and on November 25th, International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women. For her, the transversality of feminist organizations is a fundamental characteristic for organizing the streets:

***"We, in Argentina, have many feminist organizations inside political parties and unions; feminism and the women's movement manage***

***to be the only completely transversal movements because all political currents, unions and different collectives feel part of this movement and build them day by day. And this is noticeable on the streets because we all work together to be able to be there”.***

Every year — except for the latter, due to the pandemic — women meet in a different city, in another province of the country, to debate, get to know each other and generate collective strategies. They all learn a lot at the National Meeting of Women, where they organize self-care commissions, which includes defining criteria, studying city maps and scheduling meetings with local authorities, such as the Ministry of Security and the police, to guarantee the right to strike and to mitigate repression. They ask the police not to approach the demonstrations, keep their distance and never have armed men. These demands have often been met — even though there have already been episodes of repression.

On street organization, the first contributions come from the militants with more experience and practice in parties and organizations. However, Sofia also points out that it took time to understand that some strategies carried out by parties, unions and other political organizations are not so easy to adapt to a feminist demonstration. Therefore, they had to reinvent many things, such as creating self-care managers and leaders, who can generate trust and speak transversally to the plurality of movements. The transversality allows for the correct logistics of street vigils, which is based on the principle that women take care of each other. For instance, for the last 48-hour vigils for the right to abortion, the commission organized the protest by blocks, using a street

diagram. This was coordinated with members from several organizations that were distributed through certain streets and, in these spaces, they managed among themselves to carry out the care. It was necessary to inform if there was a theft, a problem with the traffic, any situation with the police or any type of aggression. The transversality of this work makes it possible for people who think differently to approach and trust each other.

The care committee of the marches for abortion rights has a special concern for women with disabilities so that they can be included in different ways in small and large acts. Mobilization events, such as debates and festivals, have sign language interpreters available, as well as materials that circulate on the internet. There is also the production of materials in Braille and preparation of debate spaces to receive wheelchair users. In large demonstrations, women with disabilities stay in a self-care enclosure so that they have peace of mind to march. Also, the abortion legalization campaign itself took into account the particular demands of these activists.

In Chile, the interviews also highlighted that support and care groups are essential. There is also the development of spokespersons that provide operational assistance to the leaders of unions and organizations in the socio-environmental, health and housing struggles. María says that women have the habit of communicating and walking among peers, establishing meeting points along the marches. Employing a list with all the telephones, the commissions track the addresses of the colleagues who will take part in the demonstration, checking before, during and after the protests how their fellow women are doing. When a protester

is a team of lawyers within the feminist coordination of March 8th, for example, that takes action.

Ana, who works in a specific collective of cyclists, also reports on the many previous meetings to organize and communicate to women so that they do not walk alone, wear comfortable clothes and shoes, tie their hair and do not wear earrings. These are also the practical recommendations that Amanda says exist in the collectives of São Paulo where she acts. These measures are made in anticipation of a violent police approach, for instance, which requires comfort if there is a need to escape. They also warn that it is necessary to take products to mitigate the impact of tear gas. María analyzes that, nowadays, it is increasingly important to provide all the necessary supplies to go to protest: mask, liquids, glasses and helmet. Along with this, it is necessary to think about the sanitation issue, that is, health. It is recommended that, in addition to light clothing, certain creams and liquids be applied to the face and eyes to reduce itching in case of tear gas.





## **“I DON’T WALK ALONE”**

**T**he interviewees reported several care strategies, ranging from territorial coordination during vigils to making legal advice available. But nothing compares to the power of care among women themselves: “I don’t walk alone”, as the feminist song on Brazilian streets rightly says. Before, during and after the protests: women are always together taking care of each other.

Marcela tells that her mother, who is a newcomer to demonstrations in Fortaleza, had never thought about the risks of demonstrating, but that she naturally managed to not going alone to the #EleNão act: “not only in the demonstrations, women walk together in different public places, go to the bathroom of parties together, and arrive at parties together”. According to the teacher, they do this out of shame and fear of being alone and also because of the desire to be aggregated in a women’s collective.

In Ana’s perspective, part of the organization of the care commissions is to reinforce the importance of (a) always being together from beginning to end and (b) never losing contact with their fellow women: always informing where you are, where you are going, with whom you are all along the way, since departing to the demonstration to arriving back


when they are alone. The green scarf, for instance, is a symbolic connector of different women, making them recognize themselves on the streets and not feeling alone. If something happens to a woman with a scarf, it is possible to know where to look for help. However, the negative side of the prop is to make these women visible to the eyes of fundamentalists and ultra-right-wingers, who attack them when unaccompanied.

In Santa Maria, Marcela, who works in welcoming students, notes that “walking in a group and forming a block” has become a very strong practice among black students, especially after the occupations of the Federal University of Santa Maria in 2017, which aroused the ire of men who anonymously leave threatening messages with the Nazi swastika throughout the corridors. In the city, walking in blocks became a growing strategic practice, which was repeated in several manifestations, such as # EleNão. Walking in a group means seeking recognition, but also protection and care: it allows black students to be among people who understand each other.

## THE DEPARTURE

The route of going to the demonstrations was a topic that appeared little in the interviews. The exception was the interview with Marcela. Not arriving alone at the demonstrations is something that seems to be crucial both in her family circle and in the host group of her students. The young women organize themselves over days so that everyone can get a ride or share a taxi. The teacher assesses that this occurs due to the custom of walking together and





to the fear of arriving alone in the acts. The preparation becomes a ritual in which the girls meet themselves in a place of concentration, begin to occupy the streets and transform themselves: they paint their bodies, dress up and make posters over hours.

These university students, from the rural area of Rio Grande do Sul, started to take to the streets after the feminist spring in 2015 and, more strongly, after the #EleNão. It is interesting to note that these young women, even though they have never suffered any type of police violence or any episode of violence in a demonstration, perceive the streets as a hostile place that requires safety nets. For them, the need for greater aggregation during the trip is a way to break with fear — and even the shame of being alone — in a universe that, little by little, is no longer new. Arriving alone at a demonstration and finding your peers there, as commonly done among men, is unthinkable for many of these girls.

## IN THE COURSE OF

**T**he interviewees' statements about the demonstrations reveal that the acts are ambiguous moments, marked by the concrete possibility of assault by fascists and police repression, but also by the height of safety and comfort of being protected by a multitude of women.

In all three countries, certainly, the pro-abortion marches are the ones that impose the greatest number of threats and the most concrete risk of physical violence against women by fundamentalist religious groups, nationalists or

sode, María recounts that, recently, a group of male evangelicals, in particular, threw a burning Bible at a feminist woman, who was left with burns over her body.

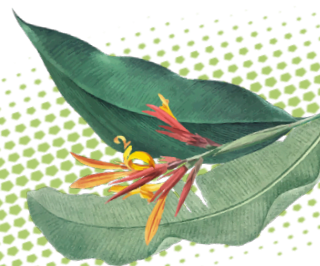
Amanda comments that men feel allowed to beat women who are inside the demonstration, especially in feminist and pro-abortion acts. She has already witnessed a man trying to run over girls who were demonstrating. In one act, she was assaulted and called a “slut” by men who tried to take her banner. It is worth mentioning that this fact (of men who try to take the banners by force) was recurrent throughout the interview statements.

Amanda understands that part of her learning as an activist was marked by constant reflection on how much she should expose or hide her body and face. Today, the autonomist no longer wears a mask to hide her identity, as she considers that, in her case particularly, this could harm her, since she has become a public and well-known figure in demonstrations. She comments that, during the SlutWalk, she showed her body. Feeling comfortable with this was important in her feminist growth and her understanding of sexual freedom. Having breasts exposed is part of a learning process for the female body. The reaction to this freedom, however, can come not only from conservatives, but also from the allied field: be it from people who moralize the body exposure, or from men who objectify it. The body that protests, welcoming and transforming public space into an arena of struggles, is also the body that suffers aggression.

María draws attention to the fact that the stereotype of female body consumption and sexist violence also accompany fellow demonstrators, who objectify women,

call them hot babes, in addition to numerous reports of men who try to touch them. This theme becomes crucial in the debate on women's safety to avoid falling into a stereotyped image in which the danger always comes from a fascist enemy camp. In this issue, it is worth mentioning that the Brazilian high school occupations, which were led by women, brought up reports of students who felt silenced, intimidated and even assaulted by companions inside the occupations (see, for instance, Barbosa, 2018).

On the other hand, it is paradigmatic that, despite extreme reports such as abuse and even stabbing, when the interviewees are provoked to talk about safety, the moment of the protest itself is very little mentioned. The meeting of women on the streets is described as a place of affection, care and protection. It is where women live the performative peak of the expression of their feminism. It is the moment when they report feeling "happy", "welcomed", "free", "complete" and "powerful". In the women's collective, the protesters join and break with the individualistic and competitive neoliberal values that, in a patriarchal structure, seek to empty and diminish the power that emanates from a women's collective.





# THE DISPERSION



*“When we leave the demonstrations, we try to do it together. Or in groups. And always warn when we arrive home. It became a common practice among us when we go out somewhere, and we won’t be calm until we all get home and let the others know: “I’m home, girls! Just arrived!”*

*(Sofia, Argentina)*

According to the interviews, the moment from leaving the demonstrations until arriving in a safe place is the most critical and dangerous moment of the marches. It is not by chance that the title of this article evokes the question “girl, did you get home?”. All the interviewees referred to the fact that the concern about whether their friend arrived “safe and sound” at her home is a constant. For Ana, one never stops asking, “Where are you? Where are you going? What time do you arrive?”.

Marcela remembers an episode in which, after participating in a demonstration, she had to give a lecture in a bookstore in a middle-tier shopping centre in Santa Maria. The moment she left the demonstration, a group of students insisted on escorting her, as her entry into the mall with “demonstration clothes” caused apprehension. She entered a territory that, if not of the enemy, was at least hostile to her agenda.

The moment of dispersal becomes very dangerous for women for many reasons. On the one hand, there is

immediate repression by the police. On the other hand, it is the moment when women are dressed in t-shirts with slogans and painted with lipstick with feminist symbols and slogans. This is when political identity is exposed in the public space. For a woman, this is risky in societies marked by inequality and exclusion where free political expression is not yet guaranteed. Besides, dispersion generally occurs at night, when many women feel most insecure and the streets are emptier. A woman who shows her feminist political identity will rarely feel safe getting on a bus alone. Glances and verbal aggressions are constant.

Amanda comments that the dispersion of an act, for a woman, means being careful not to get on a dark street, because this can result in police violence or aggression by any ordinary citizen. For this reason, the moment of dispersion is always done in pairs and the path is monitored by other companions. This can be done by GPS or by the pure intuition of friends who are not at ease until they receive news of the safe arrival at home. In Argentina, the care committee has increasingly tried to reinforce the warning that one should never leave the acts alone. The entire route should be done while maintaining communication. That is why having a charged cell phone battery is so basic and vital. This monitoring can be done by a physical company — as in the case of Marcela's students — or even by tracking. In Chile, feminist groups do virtual monitoring by cell phone, recommending that activists activate their GPS to check if their route is adequate to arrive at their home or other space.





## POLICE VIOLENCE

The three countries have a recent history of military dictatorships whose heritage persists in police practices. The institution whose supposed contemporary mission — within the democratic rule of law — is to protect citizens, is the one that most violates activists. Some of the most violent reports on dispersion come from Chile and Brazil. The Argentinian case, on the other hand, is a little different. Although episodes of repression occurred at meetings and demonstrations in 2017 and 2018, the situation in recent years has been less dramatic thanks to the intense prior negotiations on organization with the Ministry of Security and the police. For Sofia, these measures have been effective in keeping the police away from women's protests.

In Chile, police repression relies heavily on water cannons, tear gas and rubber bullets. The latter, in particular, have already caused victims of eye trauma <sup>7</sup> among women participating in demonstrations. María and Ana also call attention to the police's sexual abuse of protesters. All of this has acquired more visibility since 2011, with the explosion of student and feminist struggles in the country. María, in particular, witnesses many arrests made by the Chilean police, which are followed by sexual, verbal and corporal aggression. They say insults like "whore", "prostitute" or any sexist and aggressive language. But there are also violent and intimidating bodily practices, such as abuse through touching the demonstrators' genitals and breasts and even rape. She continues:

<sup>7</sup> In Brazil, for example, activist Deborah Fabri lost sight of an eye due to police aggression in an act of Fora Temer in 2016.

***“Unfortunately, I wish we didn’t have to take these measures, but the reality is that the Chilean police maintains the legacy of the dictatorship and is extremely abusive, repressive and violent, which practically seems to be avenging the people who are on the streets”.***

Chilean women denounce abuses to the National Institute of Human Rights, but they also increasingly resort to ABOFEM (Association of Feminist Lawyers). Activists in the country do not believe in police protection and have learned in practice that reporting abuse does not work, so the only solution to address this problem would be a complete police reform.

In Brazil, Amanda says that several companions have already been harassed during friskings and regrets that women receive no guarantee that frisking will be done by a woman. Even when this occurs, female police officers themselves are also violent towards these female bodies — indicating that a possible police reform or the guarantee of women performing the friskings is not enough to ward off violence against female and black bodies. Amanda reports that the moment of demonstration dispersion is terrifying for black women, who are subjected to everything from sexual violence by their allies or opponents to violent repression by the police. Her own life, as a peripheric woman and activist, is marked by several traumas of aggressive and violent police approach. In January 2020, during the repression of an act against the bus fare increase in São Paulo, the activist stamped the cover of the largest newspaper in Brazil, Folha de S. Paulo, with a brutal image of a policeman who dragged

and pulled her by her hair saying she was going to be beaten. Below is a long excerpt from Amanda's reflection:

*"Firstly, I think I learned that in a demonstration there are different bodies and the treatment will also be different for each body. If you're a black woman, you will feel other vulnerabilities, because the state, represented in the figure of the police officer, will feel authorized to kill these bodies and we need to talk about this authorization, because how many white women have already been dragged by their hair by the police in protests? I realized that, in this last police violence that I suffered, it was about something that I had noticed before, which was how much the existence of my hair irritated the police, because I was inside a demonstration, shouting watchwords and existing in that place. And how much this hatred becomes manifested through the existence of my pink black power hair in a society that hates kinky hair".*

On another occasion when she was arrested after a high school demonstration, a police officer tortured her psychologically saying that she was going to shave her armpits: "what does this have to do with my arrest?" — she questions herself, concluding that the prison is just one point in a whole process of hatred towards feminist women, especially black women, and how much the state, embodied in the figure of the police officer, feels authorized to violate this body.



# THE DISPERSION CONTINUUM



## FAMILY AND COMMUNITY PERSECUTION

The interview reports made it clear that we need to think of dispersion as a continuum that begins at the moment when women cells detach themselves from the crowds' bodies (distancing themselves from the aggregation support) but does not end with the arrival at home. The repression of protesting bodies does not end when they cross the door. In fact, it is not uncommon for this to be just the beginning of a process of intimidation and harassment that takes place at home itself, in the neighbourhood, at universities and on social networks. Therefore, when we speak about the safety of women who protest, it is necessary to think beyond the acts of going, crossing and returning from a march, but also to reflect on all the consequences — and social punishments — that this woman may suffer for exercising her right to demonstrate. This retaliation process, which often erodes the subjectivity, empowerment and self-esteem provided by the women's collectives, occurs online and offline simultaneously.

The fact that young Brazilian university students adhere to feminist demonstrations can be a complicating factor in family relationships. This is particularly true among girls who have left very small municipalities to study in larger cities, as is the case with many students in Santa Maria. Their family members, small rural producers, are often conservative, religious and supporters of President Jair Bolsonaro. For these families, entering the university is a kind of passport that, once the campus gate is crossed, transforms

These young women began to take part in demonstrations — Marcela reports — during SlutWalk. One of them was summoned in her community of origin to explain what the word “slut” meant. The name of the demonstration was the trigger for a breakdown in family relationships. The most drastic consequence of this breakdown is the possibility that these fathers may aggressively or physically attack their daughters for a “correction”. This caused the students to no longer post photos wearing few clothes during protests on social networks. They started using alternative profiles with pseudonyms so that the family and the community of origin couldn’t find them. One student’s father was furious when he learned that his daughter was going to demonstrations and she had to count on her mother, who, although also outraged, protected her daughter from male fury. Marcela also tells that many mothers become their daughters’ allies, hiding from their fathers that they go to protests.

The consequence of this conflict is a traumatic process that erodes the students’ enthusiasm, who stop visiting their original community out of fear. They also start to self-censor everything they post on their open social media profiles. The open wound of the broken ties is compensated by the new support networks that are formed among women. But this is not always seen as ideal, as the safety of the protesters depends on other young women, and they feel vulnerable because, if anything happens to them, the parents cannot know. They also fear that, in the event of an incident, their families will learn that they acted hidden. These students are part of a new generation of girls who are accessing universities, experiencing new realities and trying to transform structures of oppression by engaging in marches. For their personal life, this worldview transformation has a very high

and traumatic family cost.

The topic of family and community aggression also appeared in interviews about Chile and Argentina. Sofia comments that relatives and neighbours attack activists. A woman had to report a neighbour to the police as he threatened her in public while shopping at the supermarket. Argentine activists are particularly targeted and subject to political violence on the streets, as they wear the green scarf that identifies them as feminists. In 2018, in particular, cases were reported in which students suffered sanctions and harassment in several schools for displaying the scarf <sup>8</sup>.

## **VIRTUAL PERSECUTION**

It can be said that, currently, the threats on social networks make clear the multifaceted nature of the contemporary authoritarian wave, as it is manifested by the State (police and army), organized extremist groups and virtual militias. The world of threats and cyber attacks is wide and ranges from bullying to death threats. The internet, like the streets, is a hostile place for women and especially black women. A 2018 study <sup>9</sup> found that 81% of black women between 20 and 35 years of age are victims of discriminatory and hate speech on social media.

In 2018, during the presidential elections in Brazil, Facebook communities supporting Jair Bolsonaro strongly

<sup>8</sup> See, for example: <https://www.cels.org.ar/web/2018/07/usar-el-panuelo-verde-es-libertad-de-expresion/>

<sup>9</sup> See: <https://negre.com.br/mulheres-negras-sao-as-que-mais-sofrem-ataques-virtuais-diz-estudo/>

reacted to #EleNãO. In the posts of a group of voters, photos of protesters were uploaded to the group. Most of the time, they were bodies of black, fat women with naked breasts. There were also pictures of women who appeared to be drunk or under the influence of drugs. In the posts, virtual bullying started through a competition of derogatory comments, such as “this bitch does not deserve to be raped”, in addition to a constant obsession with the feminist vagina and armpit hair. “Aberration”, “dirty”, “monster” and “shit” are some of the adjectives that marked the bullying in the comments (see Pinheiro-Machado, 2019).

Amanda believes that many activists need privacy and protection training for the internet, but this does not apply to experienced activists. She has gained prominence on Twitter and believes that, in this case, her visibility helps in her safety and access to legal protection networks. Ana, a renowned activist in Chile, also comments that her visibility is a factor that gives her protection. Therefore, it is possible to realize that the choice between anonymity or visibility on social networks depends on individual strategies that must be evaluated on a case-by-case basis. At the same time that they understand that visibility helps them individually, they recognize that the organization of large marches cannot be done in an open network.

In Amanda’s view, the organization of black collectives for quotas in the university, for example, can occur in groups of social networks. But it is no longer possible to imagine a world in which the organization of big events can be done through online groups, for instance. The organization of #EleNãO was made via Facebook. If, on the one hand, this brought great visibility to the march, on the other it attracted

Bolsonarist violence and one of the organizers had her cell phone hacked. Besides that, the group's administrators had their profiles invaded and their personal data exposed, in addition to receiving threats<sup>10</sup>.

The issue of violence that activists are subjected to in networks is multifaceted. Access to security and privacy features on social media can reduce the possibility of invasions and hacked accounts, but it does not eliminate the risk of a woman being attacked, threatened and bullied. María acknowledges that virtual violence has been escalating in Chile since 2018.

This appears more crudely on the part of the anti-rights sectors, which are very violent and even sent videos of beatings and rape done to women activists, who now block contacts and aggressive comments, but there is still much to be learnt. She thinks that a protective action on social networks needs to be internationalized and that activists need to share guides and learnings to circulate between transnational self-care networks. She concludes: "If we have self-care on the streets, we need to start building our self-care on the networks as well. We are learning..."

Reflecting on all these levels of surveillance and control, Amanda regrets that "safety", for someone like her, would only exist if she never left home or accessed the internet anymore. In any other case, her body and her honour are automatically exposed to violations. In her reality, Amanda believes that the most efficient strategy is to provide access to

10 <https://www.cartacapital.com.br/politica/201cgrupo-contra-bolsonaro-inco-moda-por-causa-de-seu-potencial201d-diz-rosana-pinho-machado/>

legal advice for militants who suffer online attacks. Suing the aggressors and claiming for indemnity — believes the activist — can be an efficient way to fight the assaults that are now spreading freely in the virtual environment. Besides, it transfers the aggressor's money to the militancy.



## ONLINE AND OFFLINE SURVEILLANCE

In addition to community intimidation and persecution on social networks, when discussing women's safety, it is necessary to discuss state surveillance via these networks, cameras or face-to-face infiltration, as well as interpersonal surveillance, which is more fragmented and can come from anywhere.

Many Chilean activists work anonymously because, during the explosion of feminist protests, city officials and/or police officers (carabineros) infiltrated in social networks precisely to identify who was calling for the marches. In Brazil, the case of the army captain, Willian Pina Botelho (known as "Balta"), who infiltrated the social networks of the protest organization in 2016, puts yet another layer of complexity to internet exposure, which is the espionage that seeks to monitor activists. It is not known, in Brazil, how sporadic or frequent this type of military strategy is. Despite these two cases mentioned by Ana and Amanda respectively, all interviews said that the topic of infiltration is not widely discussed.

There are rumours that military students are infiltrating universities. Santa Maria is the second-largest military pole in Brazil. It is a city marked by the military and by the university. In the protest organizations that Marcela participated in, however, there was never a discussion about the possibility of army infiltration and espionage in local activism. She, however, talks about surveillance in the classrooms, of students who are Bolsonaro supporters and who keep quietly watching the activists, generating a state of constant fear. Young girls have been surveilled and exposed by colleagues, and fear being attacked on their way home after a night class, for example. In the case of Argentina, Sofia does not elaborate much on the theme of military or police infiltration. She, in turn, raises the question of the 7000 cameras installed throughout Buenos Aires: “so we also know that when we do a protest anywhere they are looking at us through the cameras. In fact, they told us that they follow things through the cameras. They know about all of us and our actions. Obviously, they have the records and they know who we are.”

All of this shows us that there is a generation of activists who have their particularities in terms of safety. These particularities are different from the generation that acted during the military dictatorship of the three countries, when the panic about infiltrations marked all interpersonal relationships: “Today my biggest concern is with Bolsonarists” — concludes Amanda. And Marcela agrees: “there is a much greater fear with the common Bolsonaro supporters than with the military of the region... it is a daily and microscopic violence and surveillance”.

## SUPPORT IN THE PROGRESSIVE SIDE



**D**uring the interviews, the relationship between women's agenda and the broader progressive and left-wing sectors seem to have a direct and indirect influence on the issue of women's safety. Protests led by women find different levels of support in different countries and this varies according to the themes in question.

The Argentine case is emblematic in this sense. Sofia believes that, within all the diversity of the country's left, the struggle for women's rights is widely recognized as key to the construction of left-wing agendas. The decriminalization of abortion is an agenda that, built up over decades, has gathered the radical left, the Peronist, trade unions, *barriais/villeras*<sup>10</sup> and autonomous across the board. That does not mean ignoring that sexism acts structurally and that, therefore, the agenda of women's rights ends up bumping against internal boycotts. There is also an attempt to locate and sectorize the struggles of women and feminists, which makes it difficult to understand that these agendas need to be constructed in a universal and transversal way. However, in general, Sofia believes that, despite the challenges of the process, there is sufficient support for women's protests.

María reports a similar situation in Chile in which she perceives broad political support at events led by women.



But she also recognizes that there are party groups that can use feminist causes for their own benefit and that, in the end, the topic of care always ends up being a women's agenda: it is women who take care of each other.

In Brazil, the scenario described by the interviewees is cloudier. Helena Vieira, intellectual and transfeminist activist, understands that the agenda of women — and also of the black and LGBTQIA+ movements — still finds a lot of resistance in a more traditional and/or partisan left, that classifies these agendas as identity and segregating politics. Besides, she believes that sectors of radical feminism are also part of the aggression vector against transsexual women. All of this, she assesses, undermines the development of more inclusive care practices. The issue of the safety of trans women — the ones who die the most in the world — ends up being elaborated among the LGBTQIA+ movement itself, which needs to deal with issues that range from ridicule and collective bullying to practical ones, such as enabling the use of toilets.

Unlike María and Sofia — who, when questioned about support from the left as a whole, promptly responded that women's rights were a cross-cutting and recognized issue — Amanda and Marcela were more sceptical. Amanda classifies the resistance of the left to the protagonism of feminist struggles as part of what she calls “old politics”, which “is in a place of comfort for whiteness, masculinity, cisgenderism, heterosexuality”. For her, who is an autonomist activist and was a high school student in the occupied schools

11 It is the name given in Argentina to informal settlements characterized by a dense proliferation of popular housing. It is a term similar to the favela, used in Brazil.

in 2016, the occupations are part of new forms of protests that are linked to more horizontal principles and that connect the struggles of class, race, gender and sexuality. These are radical agendas that demand the reinvention of the performative use of the body in public space — something that the “old left”, which would still be tied to the vertical model of the “sound truck” in demonstrations — would have difficulty accepting because it requires breaking with standards of normativity.

This resistance to new practices and groups that broke out in the 21st century in Brazil ends up impacting the issue of women’s safety. This is because the left that does not recognize the agenda of women as central and universal could contribute to legitimize the processes of isolation, invisibility and even blaming women for the election of Jair Bolsonaro — as was the case with #EleNão. Shortly after the huge demonstrations in September 2018, several sectors of the left ended up attributing the growth of the then authoritarian candidate to the #EleNão protests. Although many other factors were decisive for such a surge, such as the support of evangelical leaders (Pinheiro-Machado, 2019), the predominant discourse on the left itself was that #EleNão — the largest women’s march in the country’s history — had been responsible for advancing the authoritarianism that it fought.

The consequences of this type of narrative, which deals with a certain male resentment, are profound and disturbing for the theme of caring for women in protests. Blaming is in itself a process of political violence. Also, Marcela tells how the young women who had gone to the streets with power and explosion in #EleNão felt withered, repressed, excluded, guilty and even depressed after the

blaming. The professor also assesses that this process of castrating the vital energy of women on the streets directly impacts the discussion of care because today women's marches could have been on the streets in the front position against the Bolsonaro government. She asks herself "why didn't the women stay on the streets?" In her understanding, if women had continued on the streets, in many and renewed #EleNão, it would have been possible to develop the experience of demonstrations among these women who protested against authoritarianism. As in the Chilean and Argentine case, Brazil could have kept the multitudes of women struggling in the public space, which — according to the professor — would have been essential for the young activists to learn more about feminist care in protests.





## CONCLUSION

Although women's protests are not a new phenomenon, it is possible to say that the years 2010 were characterized by an explosion of feminist and women's marches in Latin America. This article sought to identify the multiple risks that are posed in protests carried out by women, focusing on the experience and reports of people acting in Argentina, Brazil and Chile. Along with this exploration of the challenges, we also sought to identify how women transform the security agenda into a matter of care, in which protesters learn and develop, in transgenerational, intersectional and transversal practices, ways to protect each other from patriarchal violence.

We emphasize the preliminary character of this research, which did not aim to find definitive results, but sought to raise questions that could, on the one hand, broaden the care debate and, on the other, inspire practical measures that can be adopted by social movements and civil society. In the lines that follow, we summarize three observations that crossed this investigation, which we consider key to continue the advancement of the political debate on the care of women in demonstrations.

**1) THE SAFETY OF WOMEN NEEDS TO BE THOUGHT OF HOLISTICALLY:** when speaking of care in demonstrations, it is necessary to avoid falling into a vision that delimits women's protests in time and space. Care cannot be a policy that is thought from door to door, that

is, from the moment when the protester leaves her home until the moment when she returns home and notifies her friend that she has arrived. Before the protests, this means discussing cross-cutting political strategies that encourage women to take to the streets. After the protests, political violence does not end with the dispersion of acts: it extends through persecutions, intimidations and threats that occur in the space of the family, the community, public transport and universities. There is also, of course, a risk that their images circulate in a derogatory and violent way in virtual spaces, which are characterized by an escalation of attacks on feminist activists.



**2) THE SAFETY OF WOMEN NEEDS TO BE THOUGHT OF IN AN INTERSECTIONAL WAY:** sexist violence manifests itself simultaneously in a structural/universal and segmented way. Singular women have singular demands and, therefore, the transversality of the struggles is fundamental so that the issue can be dealt with in an intersectional way in which different groups of activists can think about their own needs in a context in which the struggle of women can

Listening to the interviewees, it is evident that a white girl from the interior of Santa Maria places herself on the streets differently from a black girl in the city of São Paulo. Some may be more vulnerable to the aggression of the Bolsonarist neighbour, others may fear police abuse more. Experienced activists with greater visibility do not need anonymity or even protection courses on the Internet, while many other women may need both. Experienced or novice activists must also have access to legal advice that clarifies their rights to them and promotes defence in the event of abuse. Immigrant women in Santiago may not know how to access these services and may not be aware of their most fundamental rights.

The importance of peer monitoring of the demonstrators' path is consensual in all scenarios explored in this research, but it must be remembered that poor women may not have access to a sufficient internet data plan for this on their cell phones.

Trans women need to think about how they can use the toilets without being assaulted. Women in wheelchairs need to discuss dispersion strategies that are completely different from those available to people without disabilities, for whom, for instance, running in comfortable sneakers can be a useful tactic. How do you protect women who cannot run or see?

In the most extreme case of all, Marielle Franco is a symbol for many women who know that their black, indigenous, trans and peasant bodies are subject to summary execution by grileiros, policemen, militiamen and fascists.

**3) SEXIST VIOLENCE IS STRUCTURAL; THE STRUGGLES ARE TOO.** Feminist care is a measure that could be called palliative — in the narrow sense that it tries to solve specific risks for which the solution is structural — but also transformative due to the prefigurative character of the type of protective relationship that is built between women who break with patriarchal hegemonic logic.

Manuals, workshops and protective tools do not solve sexist violence, but they do provide refuge and meaning for women who build themselves in the struggle. Here it is important to note that the most effective protective measure for women who carry out protests is the protests themselves, since it is in them that, ultimately, the struggle to end the authoritarian, sexist, racist and heteronormative logic of patriarchy is endured.





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