'WE ARE HERE TO CARE'

Gendered Urban Safety in Argentina

Anna Bednarczyk

Introduction

On June 3, 2015, more than 200,000 people took to the streets of Buenos Aires to demand justice for two brutally killed teenagers, Chiara Paez and Lucia Perez. The protests *Ni Una Menos* [Not One [Woman] Less] and massive mobilizations spread all over the country and the third of June became a day of action against gender-based violence in Argentina, and later in other South American countries. The campaign has developed into a movement demanding justice and safety for all women. Argentinian cities and their public spaces became spaces for expressing these demands. By analyzing the strategies of women in Argentina for enhancing safe living environments, I will contribute to the debate on the role of care in the context of urban safety. A particular focus will be on exploring the conceptual nexus of care and urban safety in this regard.

Urban space is gendered, which implies differences in how women and men (especially cisgender men)¹ use it (Beebejaun 2017; Massey 2001; Pain 2001). Consequently, urban safety is also gendered as girls and women modify their behavior while being in/using/transiting urban spaces because they fear various forms of violence: verbal, physical, or sexual (Rainero and Rodigou 2004; Taylor 2011). This particular relationship between gender and safety begins at an early age when a girl's body is being defined as a sexual object in public spaces. A body is seen as an object that can be admired and commented on but at the same time should be controlled (Migliorini et al. 2008). Globally, girls are socialized to an 'invisibility' in public spaces that should protect them from violence, and sexual violence in particular (Pain 2001; Rivas 2009). The interconnection between navigating 'visibility' and safety impacts daily life. A visible woman is more likely to be blamed for being a target of gender-based violence. This is particularly true for women of lower classes, whose bodies were shown to be more vulnerable to violence (Falú 2014; Falú and Rainero 1996; Fenster 2005). Scarce financial resources and poor public infrastructure in marginalized districts often force them to use longer public transport routes to reach public services and to walk/use public transportation at night as they work long hours outside of their own neighborhoods (Falú 2018).

Nevertheless, feminist urban scholars emphasize that despite structures of oppression and dominance, girls and women are active subjects (Falú 2014; Fenster 2005; Roche et al. 2005). They use a variety of strategies to renegotiate their position in urban spaces. In this chapter, I argue that care is one of the strategies that women use to feel safe and redefine their presence in urban spaces. This redefinition departs from the idea of urban spaces as a threat, to urban space as an empowering experience (see Figure 7.1). The chapter draws on fieldwork data collected in 2017 and 2018, based on participatory observation of the *Ni Una Menos* collective in Córdoba—Argentina’s second biggest city—which consists of more than 20 local initiatives for women’s rights and participation in the *Encuentro Nacional de Mujeres* (ENM) [National Meeting of Women] in Trelew in 2018. I use these two case studies from the *Ni Una Menos* collective in Córdoba and the 33rd annual meeting of women to present strategies of care emerging in the urban context. This chapter consists of three parts: First, it explores the idea of collective urban safety and its intersection with the concept of care. It then introduces the Argentinian women’s rights movement and the case studies. Finally, it presents the fieldwork data through the concept of Berenice Fisher and Joan Tronto’s (1990) sisterhood-based care.

FIGURE 7.1 Demonstration in Córdoba, November 25, 2018. The slogan says “Alive, Free and Without Fear.” Source: Anna Bednarczyk, 2018.

Urban Safety and Transformative Potential of Care

The concept of urban safety used in this chapter is defined as freedom from various forms of violence: not only physical, but economic, spatial, and structural as well (Salahub et al. 2018). This definition extends the concept of urban safety to more dimensions and does not focus solely on protecting individuals. According to María Naredo Molero (2002), a narrow definition of urban safety refers to preventing crime and may result in highly militarized urban policies, such as racially targeted arrests or police raids in poor districts, and privatization of security services (e.g., the growing private security industry). A wider conception of urban safety has been characterized by various researchers as “freedom, solidarity, and mutual trust” (Naredo Molero 2002: 2, own translation), “coexistence [that] also stresses the idea of living amidst difference” (Segovia 2009: 144, own translation), or even the right to enjoy a city (Falú 2009). The common denominator is the reference to safety as a collective experience, rooted in the notion of a community. As Marta Roman Rivas (2009: 145, own translation) writes:

Safety and security, as with all basic human needs, demand complex answers and cannot be commodified or left in the hands of only one agent or sphere. They cannot be left only in private hands or exclusively to the capabilities and authority of the state. It must be recognized that safety is also a collective matter.

Safety as a collective experience needs to be sustained and nourished by care work. Care is conceptualized here as a social process of maintaining and improving the world and relations between people (Fisher and Tronto 1990: 6). There are two important characteristics that distinguish this concept from the practices of care forced upon women by gender-based divisions of labor, and those are voluntarism and reciprocity. Girls and women are willing to contribute to the community on a voluntary basis with the expectation of mutual care, as an opposition to imposed care work in households. Exploring the nexus of care and urban safety requires conceptualizing care that includes the voluntary and reciprocal care work in communities. The concept of care is often used in urban studies to analyze the geographies or spatial dimensions of unpaid women’s work (Bowlby 2012; Conradson 2003; Day 2000). Care has been affected by the neoliberal system, as Victoria Lawson (2007: 3) states:

Under neoliberal principles, care is a private affair, occurring in homes and families. In the privatization of care, we construct certain sorts of people as in need of care—the infirm, the young/elderly, the dependent, the flawed—ignoring the fact that we, all of us, give and need care.

Nevertheless, care may have the political potential as a strategy of resisting violence. Fisher and Tronto (1990) conceptualized the feminist ideals of caring: motherhood, friendship, and sisterhood that go beyond care as women’s burden. As for care in diverse communities, the concept of sisterhood is one that captures the internal inequalities:

Sisterhood is a powerful ideal for the caring process because it encompasses a double, and somewhat contradictory, meaning: sisterhood as equality with other women and in the human community and sisterhood as inequality based on birth order and the differing needs and obligations that flow from it.

(ibid.: 21)

The analysis of caring practices cannot be carried out without addressing power relations that are embedded in care work. Women are not equally exposed to gender-based violence and acknowledging the intersectional character of each community is a basis for non-exploitative practices of care. Sisterhood-based care is care that recognizes privileges based on social status but, at the same time, aims at achieving equality. As Tronto (2013) argues, care has a democratic potential to transform unequal and unjust societies under a condition of shared responsibilities. In the context of gender-based violence analyzed in this chapter, the concept of democratic care does not aim to widen the scope of women's caring obligation—from children, family, and customers to all other women. Care is rather used as a strategy for undermining the patriarchal social structure. Firstly, it provides care to women experiencing violence in the context of withdrawn state and privatized public services, which deprive many women of the resources to search for help. Secondly, sisterhood-based care may support women in realizing that care work is more than a commodity in a relationship, especially in the case of a traditional family model. Finally, a provider and recipient of care may create a relationship based on joy and reciprocity, and practices of care may have an added value, meaning a strengthened sense of safety and community. This intersection of collective safety and sisterhood-based care is the basis for analyzing women's struggles for safer cities in Argentina.

Current Struggles for Women's Safety in Argentina

Argentina experiences high levels of urbanization and femicides. It is one of the most urbanized countries in South America with 91.75% of the population living in cities. In 2019, 327 cases of women killed by men were registered as *femicidios*. In 46% of the cases the aggressor was a male intimate partner, in 21% of the cases it was a male ex-partner, and in another 14% of cases it was a male family member. Sixty-three percent of these women were murdered in their homes, 27% in public spaces, and 5% in the perpetrator's home (Observatorio de las Violencias de Género Ahora Que Si Nos Ven 2020). While girls and women also face other forms of harassment, femicide is the most extreme form of gender-based violence. In recent years, because of growing economic inflation in Argentina and the reduced role of the state, the funds for combating gender-based violence have been significantly reduced. The *National Action Plan for Prevention, Assistance, and Eradication of Violence Against Women* has seen their monitoring budget cut from ARS\$50 million in 2018 (approximately €800,000) to ARS\$32 million in 2019 (approximately €480,000) (Pavon 2018).

In this context of growing violence and unstable governance, Argentina has a long history of struggles for gender equality and women's rights. Especially impressive, in terms of the scale and growth dynamics, is the movement *Ni Una Menos* that began in 2015 and became an umbrella organization for various initiatives fighting against gender-based violence. The *Ni Una Menos* collectives are addressing more than physical violence against women as they are also involved in other social struggles. The *Ni Una Menos* collective in Córdoba is an active member of the national coalition for reproductive rights, a member of the organizing committee of the annual Pride parade *Marcha del Orgullo Disidente* for LGBTQ+ rights, and a supporter of emerging struggles of women in trade unions. In 2017, the collective supported women in a sexual harassment-related court case against the public transportation trade union.

Besides these recent (and internationally reported) events, Argentina has a long tradition of women's rights movements. Each year, since 1986, women meet at the ENM to discuss the struggles and challenges of the women's right movement. The first ENM took place in Buenos Aires and was attended by approximately 1,000 women. Year after year the number

of participants has grown, and the issues discussed started to be present in mainstream political debates. Many campaigns for women's rights originated from the ENMs and were afterward approved by the parliament. Two examples are electoral gender quotas (introduced in 1996) and the incorporation of *El Comité para la Eliminación de la Discriminación Contra la Mujer* [The Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women] introduced in 1994 to the constitution (Const. Arg. art. 75). The most current struggle is a national campaign for the right to legal, free, and safe abortion that started in 2003 during the ENM in Rósario. Since then almost 500 various initiatives across the country have been initiated to lobby for reproductive rights. The core idea behind the ENM is gathering women in one city, reclaiming public spaces, and debating the state of women's rights in the country (see Figure 7.2). This massive potential of 'taking over' a city was noticeable during the 33rd ENM in Trelew in Patagonia. It was the first meeting that took place in the south of Argentina, in a medium-sized city with a population of approximately 90,000 that hosted 50,000 women. In spatial terms, the population grew by more than 50% and the whole city functioned around the ENM for three days. Following tradition, the meeting ended with a march that literally filled the public space of Trelew, with a 40-block long demonstration. The magnitude of the gathering confronts the question of what could happen if urban space was not gendered and women were not afraid to occupy it—physically as well as politically, in terms of demanding their rights.

The 2018 National Meeting of Women may be used as an example of sisterhood-based care. One of the main reasons for organizing it in Patagonia was to show solidarity with the Indigenous *Mapuche* community that has been struggling for years for land rights. The situation was exacerbated under the presidency of Mauricio Macri (2015–2019) and so situating the meeting in Trelew held great significance. Indigenous women played an important role

FIGURE 7.2 A panel discussion on the main square in Trelew during the National Meeting of Women, October 14, 2018. Source: Anna Bednarczyk, 2018.

in the organizing committee and more women from rural Patagonia had a chance to participate in the meeting.

The ENM and the *Ni Una Menos* attest to the collective potential for this movement to address gender-based violence. The leading slogan *Ni Una Menos* means ‘Not One [Woman] Less’—for *all* women. It is a call for collective care for each female individual that is experiencing violence, both in public and private spheres. The National Meeting of Women creates a safe space for gathering a diverse community. Despite the significant socio-economic differences, tens of thousands of women travel to one city and gather together to debate the current challenges for the women’s rights movement. Later they continue the work of care in their local communities. The practical application of the theory of collective urban safety is care work put into creating and sustaining safe, inclusive, and diverse communities.

Caring Strategies in the Context of Urban Safety

The demands and activities of the people who organized under the aegis of the *Ni Una Menos* collectives and ENM are translated into daily experiences of many girls and women. I use sisterhood-based care as an analytical tool to capture a variety of care practices that girls and women carry out in urban spaces. This informal, intimate part of safety is something that cannot be described by statistics or controlled by urban policies. One of the forms in which care is manifested is the personal, almost physical, support that women provide to each other. In the interviews, women always underlined that such a ‘normal’ activity as transiting a city alone involves a network of friends and communication channels. A few of my interlocutors mentioned using *WhatsApp* to inform friends about their routes during the night. They either use the geo-location function that allows friends to follow the route in real-time or inform them about reaching home via group chats. The group chats work better than individual messages because multiple friends want to receive the confirmation of safety (this point appeared in more than one interview). Safety concerns are also connected with using a taxi. In 2016, a mobile application *SheTaxi* was created to only offer services of female taxi drivers. In 2017, in Córdoba, the service was so popular that during weekend nights the waiting time was approximately one hour. The planning and strategizing around getting back home during the night are based on the trust and support of a network of friends. This ‘physical’ aspect of support appeared in a few conversations:

On the macro level, more abstractly, [safety] is how we take care of each other. Now you go out and you don’t know if you’re going to go back home, physically.

(member of a feminist youth organization and active in Ni Una Menos collective, personal communication, November 2017, own translation)

Safety always goes along with rights, the power to walk peacefully. You don’t have to notify your friend when you get home because we all notify ourselves. This is very utopian but it is what we fight for, isn’t it?.

(member of a neighborhood association of women and active in Ni Una Menos collective, personal communication, November 2017, own translation)

It is one thing to read [feminist/theoretical publications]. You can read millions of things, but it is something different when you go out, on the streets, when you have to

choose what to wear and how to interact with other people. With these much more practical things, often daily, but more it's difficult to break those stereotypes.

(member of a feminist youth organization and active in Ni Una Menos collective, personal communication, November 2017, own translation)

The striking pattern in those interviews was the awareness of difference between safety as an abstract concept and safety as an everyday experience. Young girls expressed many concerns about daily 'urban' decisions, such as transiting a city, choosing between public and private means of transportation, planning sport activities (place and time), and navigating nightlife (place and companionship). Care is inevitably connected with those decisions as the notion of agency and freedom of women in urban space is 'utopian' (member of a neighborhood association of women and active in *Ni Una Menos* collective, personal communication, November 2017). In order to sustain safety, girls and women create networks of care that allow them to navigate urban life (see Figure 7.3). The concept of sisterhood-based care captures the reciprocal relations between women that differ from each other in terms of social class, race, or place of residence.

FIGURE 7.3 Slogans on the street in Córdoba, November 1, 2018. "Can someone think of me?" "I love you." Source: Anna Bednarczyk, 2018.

Another strategy emerging from the intersection of urban safety and care is carrying out collective actions in the struggle for safe cities. In addition to the previously mentioned personal network of friends, care also has the potential to fuel political mobilization.

Gender solidarity refers to everything that is collective, it is political. It is not a voluntary service that I assist this poor woman and help her because she is a woman. This is a political concept to understand that we are constructing collective power, power that aims to transform and we are going to create this sisterhood.

(gender studies professor, personal communication, December 2017, own translation)

The potential of collective actions embedded in the idea of the sisterhood-based care was visible during the 33rd National Meeting of Women. Despite this gathering's peculiar detachment from the daily life of girls and women, the majority of my interlocutors underlined the important role of 'being together' and 'caring for each other' for a few days during the ENM. This experience of the gathering is later reproduced in their hometowns. For my interlocutors, participating in the National Meeting of Women was an important event in their individual life trajectories but also in the trajectory of the women's rights movement in Argentina. The meeting also has a very significant spatial dimension as every year it is organized in a different city and aims to occupy the urban spaces and reverse the logic of public space. Women fill the streets, parks, squares, and public transportation without the fear of being harassed. As one of the young women noticed:

Also, what is nice is the appreciation of public spaces that you don't have on a daily basis. I mean if you walk and it is not the gathering [National Meeting of Women] everyone harasses you, you are walking and all the benches are occupied by guys and you can't talk loudly.

(member of a youth organization and LGBTQ activist, November 2017, own translation)

During the ENM various topics are discussed, from workers' rights, social housing, and LGBTQ+ issues to alternative medicine and football groups for women. An integral part of each meeting is also a market where women sell their products and organize a communal kitchen. The last day ends with a huge march/manifestation across the city. The women's meeting in Trelew was an extraordinary spatial experience as, despite its small size, the march filled the city borders. The collective actions in urban spaces allow girls and women to redefine their presence, demand their rights, and be visible as political subjects. During my fieldwork in 2017 I also observed in Córdoba collective actions as a form of showing support and solidarity. Under the Macri government there were multiple cases of suppression of public gatherings and protests. On October 27, 2017, four young queer activists were arrested after the protest against state brutality. They were randomly stopped after the protests ended in bars in the city center. The mobilization to express support for those arrested was incredibly fast. The address of the police station was disseminated through various online groups and an all-night solidarity action was carried out in front of the police building. All four detainees were released at 6 a.m. the next day without any charges. Again, the physical presence, self-organization, and expression of care for the arrested young women were strategies to reinforce urban safety. The right to protest and demand democratic rule of law must be considered an integral part of safety. As one of my interviewees stated:

Safety is knowing that we can go to protest without the fear of repression that we have been living with up to now. People who used to protest are afraid to go and protest socially now. I think this is something we have to challenge.

(member of a feminist youth organization and active in Ni Una Menos collective, personal communication, November 2017, own translation)

The occupation of public spaces, as in the case of National Meeting of Women or various solidarity actions, is a strategy to make visible women's struggles for safer living environments. Practices of care are here elevated to caring for people that are not personal friends but are united under the same demands. Only a collective approach to safety allows for widening the concept of urban safety. The private approach to safety does not take into consideration that some urban security measures may restrict basic democratic rights, such as the right to a public gathering or the right to a fair trial.

Summary

While presenting how the concept of care manifests in women's urban safety, one cannot leave out the fact that care is also imposed on women as responsibilities within the family and/or unpaid/low-paid jobs. The places where women often meet to discuss violence (nurseries, schools, and cultural centers) are the feminized workplaces of teachers, cooks, and social workers. Yet women are performing another task of care which is caring about and for each other. The reason why this voluntary care has such potential for exploration in the case of Argentina is that it is being framed as a political strategy to challenge the *status quo*. The massive occupations of public spaces, the expansion of the networks of initiatives, and intersectional activities aim at creating a safer living environment for women. This chapter has outlined how practices of care are emerging and being embedded within the structure of women's political struggles for safer living environments. They range from the relationships based on personal trust to sisterhood-based care for those who experience injustice or violence. Using a wider concept of safety allows for capturing the experiences of everyday life of girls and women in cities.

Note

- 1 Cisgender is a term referring to individuals whose gender assigned by birth matches their bodies and their personal identities (Schilt 2009).

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