


ARTICLE

The Rural Woman Speaks in 1970s Argentina

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Abstract

Studies of the “people’s spring,” the period of unprecedented social mobilization in Argentina in the early 1970s, frequently omit rural women even though they were among the sectors that rallied for social justice. In most of Latin America at the time, rural women were prevented from equal participation in social movements; in contrast, rural women in northeastern Argentina actively participated in the Movimiento Agrario Misionero (MAM). This article uses letters and newspaper articles in *Amanecer agrario* to answer two questions: First, what did womanhood mean for rural women in northeastern Argentina during the early 1970s? Second, what did the “people’s spring” mean for these same women? Although the movement split, with women from small farms generally wanting MAM to expand its efforts to broader societal problems and women from medium farms generally wanting MAM to stay focused on the concerns of Misiones farmers, throughout it all, rural women communicated their hopes, desires, and concerns for themselves, their families, and their communities.

Keywords: gender; feminism; social activism; agriculture; 1970s; Argentina

Resumen

Los estudios sobre la “primavera de los pueblos”, el período de movilización social sin precedentes en Argentina a principios de la década de 1970, suelen omitir a las mujeres rurales a pesar de que éstas se encontraban entre los sectores que luchaban por la justicia social. En ese momento, en la mayor parte de América Latina a las mujeres rurales se les impedía una participación equivalente a la de los hombres rurales en los movimientos sociales y, sin embargo, en el caso de las mujeres rurales del noreste argentino, éstas participaban activamente en el Movimiento Agrario Misionero (MAM). Este ensayo utiliza artículos y cartas de *Amanecer agrario* para responder a dos preguntas: Primero, ¿qué significaba ser mujer para las mujeres rurales del noreste argentino a principios de los años setenta? Segundo, ¿qué significó la “primavera de los pueblos” para estas mismas mujeres? Aunque el movimiento se dividió —las mujeres de pequeñas parcelas generalmente querían que el MAM extendiera sus esfuerzos a problemas sociales más amplios, mientras que las mujeres de parcelas medianas generalmente querían que el MAM se mantuviera enfocado en las preocupaciones de los agricultores de Misiones— en todo momento, las mujeres rurales comunicaban sus esperanzas, deseos y preocupaciones por ellas mismas, sus familias y sus comunidades.

Palabras claves: género; feminism; activismo social; agricultura; 1970s; Argentina

In its second issue (June 1972), the *Amanecer Agrario* newspaper of Misiones in northeastern Argentina published a letter from Juana:

When reading our by-weekly newspaper, I was thrilled to see an article dedicated to the *campesina* woman in a small corner of the newspaper. It wasn't because I saw a publication that mentions women, because our newspapers and magazines almost always dedicate an article to us that addresses fashion, cooking, etc. They are articles aimed at women who live in the city. And furthermore, their content is not about problems that we, *campesina* women, are living; that which gives us joy or saddens us. For this reason, I was happy to know that one of us, a *campesina* woman, had written it.¹

As Juana described, she did not connect with articles dedicated to urban women who had nothing in common with rural women. For this reason, Juana was happy to discover the article in the new column, "The Rural Woman of Misiones Speaks" (*La mujer rural misionera tiene la palabra*). As the official newspaper of the provincial agrarian movement, Movimiento Agrario Misionero (MAM), *Amanecer Agrario* sought to inform and organize farmers in Misiones around rural issues. Throughout its three-year life span, the newspaper provided a venue for rural women to express their hopes, joys, and concerns. In almost every issue, it published letters written by women like Juana who wanted to improve the lives of rural farmers. They took pride in their caregiving role as wives, mothers, and daughters, and they called for women to have an equal voice as men and to participate in decision-making about both their families and their communities. By encouraging rural women's active participation, not only in letter writing but also in attending and speaking at community meetings, giving speeches at protests, serving as community delegates, and even participating in the Central Coordinating Commission, the agrarian movement that spawned the newspaper stands out from agrarian movements during the period elsewhere in Latin America.

MAM was part of what the historian Luis Alberto Romero described as the "people's spring," a period between 1969 and 1973 of unprecedented social mobilization when people from diverse sectors of society tried to create a more socially just Argentina (Romero 2013, 180–191). It fit the larger context of protests against authoritarianism, racism, sexism, and inequality across the globe. For Argentina, it was a short period of enthusiasm and hope for the future before radicalization and violence culminated in state-sponsored terrorism.

Before the "people's spring," Peronism and anti-Peronism polarized Argentina. A 1955 coup removed the populist president Juan Domingo Perón, and the military government banned the Peronist party from politics, but many in the working class remained loyal to Perón. After another coup in 1966, the military government of General Juan Carlos Onganía tried to use authoritarianism and repression to restore order and unify the country. The regime's failings became apparent with the 1969 Cordobazo, when the police violently repressed large demonstrations in Córdoba that were instigated by unionized workers and joined by students, workers, and common citizens unhappy with the government and the state of the economy. The scale of the protests, combined with the coming together of people from diverse classes and political beliefs, as well as the violent police response, catalyzed the ensuing wave of social mobilizations. A new tax, increased public utility rates, and abuse by government officials combined with underlying discontent to spark protest. Argentines wanted better living conditions, a more equal society, and elections. By 1970, a handful of urban armed revolutionary groups from the Left, made up largely of middle-class youth, emerged in support of national liberation. Onganía's authoritarian

¹ Juana, "La mujer rural misionera tiene la palabra," *Amanecer Agrario*, no. 2 (June 1972).

regime had not restored order and unity, and important officers supported a return to democracy. Seeking a political solution, General Alejandro Lanusse seized the presidency in early 1971 and immediately announced a lifting of the ban on political parties and called for general elections. Lanusse's opening inspired hopes, and in the same year, *Movimiento Agrario Misionero* was founded.

Ironically, Perón's return to the presidency in 1973 ended the people's spring. The former populist cracked down on the political Left, fueling the radicalization of revolutionary movements like the Peronist Montoneros and the Trotskyist People's Revolutionary Army (ERP by its Spanish initials). To that point, urban guerrillas had mostly done violence against property, but they began to resort to kidnappings in order to buy weaponry to fight the army. Public opinion against the leftist guerrillas intensified. At the same time, a right-wing Peronist death squad, Triple A (*Alianza Anticomunista Argentina*), tried to eliminate leftists through torture and forced disappearances. After the vice president Isabel Perón assumed the presidency upon her husband's death in 1974, violence and economic problems escalated. When a military coup removed her from power in 1976, many Argentines were relieved. A deepening and systematization of state terrorism ensued, and military rule continued until the return to democracy in 1983.

This article answers two questions. First, what did womanhood mean for rural women in northeastern Argentina during the early 1970s? Over thirty years ago, Lynne Phillips criticized the "limited exploration thus far of how rural women in Latin America themselves define and interpret the world around them," and encouraged studies that give women a voice (Phillips 1990). In the ensuing years, scholars have studied rural women in Latin America, but most focus more on how the government or other groups saw them or wanted to shape them rather than how rural women interpreted and envisioned their place in society and in the family.²

In the 1970s, second-wave feminism arrived in Argentina, focusing on issues such as birth control, sex and sexuality, and the division of labor in the home. In doing so, it challenged conventional ideas on virginity, marriage, motherhood, and the Argentine family. At the same time, it promoted gender equality and spurned marketing of beauty products and fashion that subordinated women. Second-wave feminism appealed primarily to a small group of mostly middle- and upper-class urban women (Vassallo 2005; di Liscia 2008; Trebisacce 2013a). Female militants in the Peronist Left and ERP sometimes overlapped with feminists, but more often, political struggle subsumed their support for feminist causes (Grammático 2005; Sepúlveda 2015; Oberti 2013).

In this article, I read and analyze what rural women wrote. In doing so, the article joins growing scholarship exploring letters written by common Argentines (Guy 2016; Filer 2017; Adair 2020). Rural people embraced the opportunity to share their opinions in letters. In the 1960s and 1970s, Colombian peasants sent thousands of such letters

² For Nicaragua, nineteenth-century liberal reforms reinforced patriarchal relations by enacting legislation that granted a husband ample legal control over his wife and her body while limiting her rights (Dore 2006). Similarly, Mary Kay Vaughan found that in Mexico during the 1930s, the postrevolutionary state intervened in the domestic sphere and modernized the patriarchy in peasant households as a means to advance national development. Jocelyn Olcott acknowledges that most women supported Catholic and conservative movements that celebrated women's domestic roles (Vaughan 2000; Olcott 2005, 3). Interviews with peasant women in Bolivia reveal that land reform and activism intensified patriarchal structure in household in the 1950s (Gordillo 2022, 227–265). In 1960s and 1970s Chile, the belief in men's sexual authority over women resulted in gendered divisions of labor and meant that rural women's activism was restricted by their roles as wives and mothers (Tinsman 2002). In Colombia, the Catholic Church advocated that women's primary responsibility was caring for children and home, but it also called for rural women to have the same rights in society and the family as men. Rural women were primarily concerned about their husband's violence or alcoholism, and they described other day-to-day difficulties they faced (Roldán 2014, 30 and 39). Similar to how urban women in 1950s Cuba linked their political activism to their moral authority as mothers, rural women in northeastern Argentina embraced their caregiving role as mothers, wives, and daughters and used it to justify radical gender parity (Chase 2015, 77–104).

annually to the Catholic organization *Acción Cultural Popular* (Roldán 2014, 38). The letters published in *Amanecer Agrario* highlight rural women's conceptualization of rural womanhood: they prized their role as mothers, wives, and daughters, and although the letter writers called for radical gender parity, other rural women sat on the sidelines.

The second question animating this article is what the "people's spring" meant for rural women. Much has been written about students, workers, and the New Left during this period. Most recently, scholars have explored the New Left's transnational linkages and why members of the middle class both joined in and abstained from the 1970s political struggles (Marchesi 2018; Manzano 2014; Carassai 2014). Most of that analysis centers on urban Argentines. In contrast, this article explores rural women in the country's northeastern borderlands. In doing so, it exposes how the people's spring was a diverse and adaptive movement. Rural women denounced government neglect and exploitation by big companies, and they lobbied for change. They wanted Argentina to be more economically just and to support its rural farmers.

The article contributes to the growing literature on rural activism in Latin America. Much of it focuses on land reform efforts and how rural women benefited only indirectly, because their husbands, envisioned as heads of household, received property rights (Deere 2019; Soliz 2021, 163). Furthermore, rural women were often excluded from land reform activism (Sarzynski 2018, 18).³ Unlike elsewhere, MAM primarily served farming families who already owned land, and so land redistribution was not a major issue. Furthermore, MAM encouraged rural women's active participation rather than advocating for separate women's groups as did other agrarian movements (Olcott 2005; Stephen 1997). Only in more recent years, after the return to democracy in much of the region, have rural women more generally become vocal and active in calling for social and economic change (Stephen 1997; León 1990).

Examining both articles written by female leaders of MAM and letters from female readers exposes the divisions and limits of the people's spring in rural Argentina. In several articles, more radicalized MAM leaders, many who had ties to the Peronist Left, sought to educate and mobilize members to extend their efforts for change beyond just the sectoral interests of rural farmers in Misiones to include feminism, social issues, and political change. The letters by rural women reveal an ambivalent response. Some wanted to work for broader changes, but many wanted the movement to stay focused on better prices for agricultural goods. Such disagreements were not limited to the rural sector. There were many divisions and fractures in Argentina's leftist movements.

Over the years, a few Argentine scholars have studied the 1970s agrarian movement in northeastern Argentina. They've explored why the movement appealed to rural people across several provinces: its ideological origins, the underlying socioeconomic conditions, and who joined it. They've looked at divisions and uniting factors within the individual agrarian leagues and across the movement as a whole. In the case of MAM, such analysis demonstrates how members' multifaceted and often conflicting visions undermined and fractured the movement (Ferrara 1973; Bartolomé 1982; Roze 1992; Galafassi 2006, 2008; Moyano Walker 2020). The next section describes how the Catholic Church played a foundational role. Similarly, the church played an important role in social activism in rural Colombia during the 1960s and 1970s, especially in promoting a progressive family

³ As José M. Gordillo describes for 1950s Bolivia, "peasant societies were particularly patriarchal and women were not allowed to participate in politics. The public was a male-dominated sphere, where women were banned" (Gordillo 2022, 14–15). Activism by rural women was more nuanced in Chile. Although men disproportionately benefited from land reform, some rural women participated indirectly by redistributing food during the Ránquil rebellion (Klubock 2022, 216–217). In the 1960s and early 1970s, rural women played significant roles in the struggles for housing, land, and higher wages even though only a few achieved formal union member status and they participated only occasionally in union meetings (Tinsman 2002, 12 and 117).

planning campaign that extended to other programs involving rural women (Roldán, 2014). Elsewhere in Latin America, communists and socialists played a key role in instigating agrarian movements (Klubock 2022; Sarzynski 2018).

The sources for this article include MAM statutes, memoirs, and *Amanecer Agrario*. The methodology gives primacy to the letter writers and how they describe themselves and their goals. The letters written by ordinary female MAM members are compared with articles written by female MAM leaders with ties to the Peronist Left. Differing priorities—staying focused on agricultural issues or expanding the movement to address broader structural problems—emerged, but throughout, rural women embraced their identities as mothers, wives, and daughters and used the moral authority derived from that role to legitimize their social activism.

Roots of the movement

Founded in 1971 to represent farmers in Misiones, MAM was part of the broader *ligas agrarias* movement that flourished in the five provinces of northeastern Argentina (Chaco, Formosa, Corrientes, Misiones, and Santa Fe) in the early 1970s. The movement brought together rural farmers who felt ignored by the government and exploited by the large industrial companies that bought their products. These small- and medium-sized producers perceived themselves as marginalized by the prevailing economic model that focused on industrialization and favored large-scale agriculture. As a result, they felt unable earn a good standard of living for their families and their principal demand was a higher price for the agricultural products that they produced.

According to the MAM statutes, members were farmers (*agricultores* or *productores*). The first statute specified that the movement brought together “all the *agricultores* of both sexes” from Misiones, and the third statute explained that the formation of MAM was fundamentally motivated by “an unjust social and economic situation that affects all agrarian families, and especially those of small and medium *productores*” (Ferrara 1973, 337). Both *agricultores* and *productores* translate best into English as “farmers,” rural folks who generally own their property; sell a significant portion of their production, thereby engaging with the market economy; and are able to save money (accumulate capital) when times are good.

MAM members also often identified as *colonos*, land-owning farmers who migrated to the region, mainly from Europe, in the early twentieth century. *Colonos* maintained strong ethnic identities and a sense of pride in European origin. Hence, the term highlighted ethnicity. To this day, many farmers in Misiones and eastern Corrientes continue to self-identify as *colonos*, and their communities still celebrate European heritage. In contrast, much of the rest of the population of Misiones, including rural workers, were mestizo, often of Paraguayan or Brazilian descent and with Spanish surnames.

MAM members sometimes identified as *campesinos*, a term for rural people who focus on self-sufficiency. The closest English-language equivalent is *peasant*. In contrast to farmers, *campesinos* consume most of what they produce and sell cash crops for survival, and thus, the term does not accurately describe MAM members. In fact, while *campesinos* made up an important part of the agriculture sector for most Latin American countries in the 1960s and 1970s, relatively few *campesinos* existed in Argentina (Baranger 2008, 34–39). MAM members likely used the term *campesino* because it had become politicized and was broadly used to describe disenfranchised rural people throughout Latin America (Boyer 2003). By referring to themselves as *campesinos*, MAM members connected with the broader genre of rural people who felt exploited and wanted change.

The northeastern region of Argentina has a long history of cooperativism (Rodríguez 2018), and there was some minor communist agitation (Martínez Chas 2011), but overall,

protest had been stifled after four people died, dozens were injured, and many were imprisoned in response to a large public protest in Oberá (the second largest town in Misiones) in 1936 about low yerba mate and tobacco prices and the prohibition on new yerba mate cultivation (Waskiewicz 2002). But times were changing. In neighboring Paraguay, Ligas Agrarias Cristianas had a national membership of ten thousand families as of 1970 and the organization provided both inspiration and a reference for *ligas agrarias* in northern Argentina (Nardulli 2021, 5–6; Telesca 2014).

As in Paraguay, the *ligas agrarias* movement grew out of Catholic Action's efforts to energize and revitalize Catholicism in the countryside. In the 1920s, Pope Pius XI had formalized Catholic Action as a mechanism for strengthening the church in response to growing competition from secularism, communism, and other faith traditions. Established in Argentina in 1931, Catholic Action initially focused on forming groups of well-trained and dedicated lay Catholics to act as apostles for Catholicism in urban areas and the littoral of the country (Acha 2010). In 1948, it sent groups of young people from urban areas to promote Catholic religious practices in the countryside. Many of these youth leaders found it difficult to focus on evangelization and spirituality given the day-to-day realities of poverty they encountered. As a result, Catholic Action created a separate branch (Movimiento Rural Cristiano, MRC) in 1958 to address the specific needs and concerns of the Argentine countryside. MRC provided courses for agrarian youth that included religious activities along with technical training and discussions about economic problems.⁴ Between 1958 and 1965, MRC organized seventy courses for over 2,100 participants, plus another fifteen courses for rural teachers, with more than 600 participants (Contardo 2013, 9). By 1965, MRC had 4,000 members in 230 rural groups (Moyano Walker 2020). MRC employed the method of “see, judge, and act” to explore the realities experienced by rural people. Although action was a basic component of “see, judge, and act,” it was not prioritized. Instead, MRC primarily employed action as a pedagogical tool (Ferrara 1973, 18–26; Hendel 2007, 12–13).

MRC's attention to economic and social problems coincided with broader trends articulated by the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965). In 1968, Latin American bishops met in Medellín to discuss the application of Vatican II and agreed that the church should pay special attention to the poor and oppressed. This vision was evident in liberation theology, which combined political philosophy with Christian theology to bring about social and economic justice. In Argentina, some four hundred priests joined the Movement of Priests for the Third World, which was dedicated to working with the poor to eradicate poverty and oppression (Moyano Walker 2020). However, only a fraction of the Argentine church adopted such beliefs and practices. The church hierarchy remained focused on spiritual matters and, especially during the dictatorship, considered Third World priests to be subversives.

This division within the Catholic Church influenced the formation of Argentina's *ligas agrarias*. As progressive priests and laypeople grew more socially and politically active, conducting consciousness-raising activities with rural people to stimulate social change, the church hierarchy wanted the MRC to restrict its activities to evangelization and avoid confrontation within society. As a result, the first *ligas agrarias* formed in the Chaco in 1970. Over the next three years, *ligas agrarias* formed in Santa Fe, Misiones, Formosa, Corrientes, and Entre Ríos. By 1973, the movement had grown to over twenty thousand families and fifty-four thousand young people (Ferrara 1973, 207–216; Roze 1992, 1:10).

Although *ligas agrarias* were not officially connected to the Catholic Church, local priests and lay Catholics played a central role in their formation. Early on in the Chaco, Bishop Ítalo Di Stéfano held the unofficial title of founder and leader of Ligas Agrarias Chaqueñas

⁴ Similarly, under Perón, the provincial government of Buenos Aires held classes to educate rural women about household and farm activities (Gutiérrez 1999).

and publicly supported the *ligas'* initial protests (Ferrara 1973, 120). In Misiones, the MRC and Bishop Jorge Kemerer trained and organized rural youth, but by 1971, youth leaders wanted to move beyond religious activities to try to solve problems in the countryside. Kemerer agreed; he participated in and gave the opening address for the first protest organized by MAM. Through the MRC, the church gave MAM material support, including a vehicle, fuel, stipends for MAM leaders, a local radio program, and a building that functioned as a central office and living quarters for several MAM leaders. MAM leaders later speculated that the organization probably would not have existed without such backing (Berent 2011, 54–55; Fernández Long, Berent, and Fernández Long 2019, 93).

A number of MAM leaders become involved through the MRC. For example, Susana (Susi) Benedetti, who served as the administrative secretary of MAM and wrote various articles in “The Rural Woman of Misiones Speaks,” grew up in a rural farming family outside of Misiones (in Entre Ríos) and was active in MRC as a teenager. During a MRC youth meeting, she met her future husband (Juan Carlos Berent), who was the son of European farming colonists who had settled in Misiones. Around 1971, Benedetti moved to Misiones to be with Berent, and together they helped organize farmers to form MAM (Benedetti 2011). Similarly, Estela Urdániz, who managed MAM’s newspaper, was also active in MRC. Urdániz grew up in the less affluent southern part of Buenos Aires and had worked with MRC since the mid-1960s as a rural teacher and then in communications. Given her journalism experience, combined with her personal commitment to social change, a French adviser to MAM who was part of the international Catholic organization Movimiento Internacional de la Juventud Cristiana Agrícola y Rural recommended that Urdániz oversee *Amanecer Agrario*. Though reticent, Urdániz was known to have ties to the Peronist Left. Last, although Pablo Fernández Long did not come to MAM by way of the MRC, he had studied to be a priest. The son of a former director of the prestigious Universidad de Buenos Aires, Fernández Long moved from Buenos Aires in January 1972 to join MAM as an adviser. He had recently earned a degree in sociology and wanted to participate in “the collective construction of a liberating project” in rural Argentina. As he later described, he “was simply doing what any ‘normal’ young person of the period would do. Look for a place to join the fight of the people against the dictatorship” (Fernández Long 2011, 32).

To educate and mobilize rural farmers, MAM and other *ligas agrarias* used consciousness-raising methods employed by MRC and by movements throughout Latin America during this period to promote radical social change (Rappaport 2020; Freire [1968] 2014). MAM’s statutes specified that each settlement have one or more base communities with a minimum of twenty and a maximum of one hundred members and employ already familiar practices like “see, judge, and act” (Ferrara 1973, 337–39). While MRC emphasized the learning component in its consciousness-raising activities and downplayed action, *ligas agrarias* employed learning as only the first step to spurring action (Ferrara 1973, 25; Hendel 2007, 12–13). In base communities, members of the *ligas agrarias* discussed problems facing rural farmers and followed up by organizing and coordinating strikes and protests.

The idea of a syndicate to improve small- and medium-sized farmers’ living standards fit well with Peronist goals, but MAM was created as an apolitical organization. As Fernández Long later described, “In MAM, there were Peronists, Radicals, Socialists, Communists, apoliticals, Catholics, Evangelicals, and non-believers, and it was a syndicate for everyone.” To emphasize this point, people would repeatedly say in the meetings, “In MAM, nothing of politics!” (Fernández Long 2011, 38). Avoiding political divisions was emphasized because of class differences. Not only was there division between peon laborers and farmers who owned land; there was also the divide between small-, medium-, and large-scale farmers. Even though politics were downplayed, many Catholic youth had become aligned with Peronism in the 1960s (Zanca 2006, 65–78). Some MAM members

joined the Peronist Left and tried to get MAM to extend its efforts from exclusively agricultural issues to the fight for broader social and economic change (Rodríguez 2009). But MAM elections revealed that more members opposed an alignment with the Peronist Left and did not want the movement to extend its efforts beyond concerns directly related to the economic interests of rural farmers in Misiones.

Amanecer Agrario and “The Rural Woman Speaks”

Amanecer Agrario was an important tool for advancing MAM’s agenda. In its first issue, a founding member explained the goals for the newspaper. Oreste Pedro Peczak described it as the voice of MAM, where “the *colonos* of Misiones will say all that they want to say.” MAM leadership would use it to quickly communicate with and educate members spread out across Misiones and members would reinforce these efforts. Peczak acknowledged, “It is true that a small group of colleagues will have responsibility, but their work will be useless if readers do not support them with their critiques, advice, collaboration, articles, questions, letters, etc.”⁵

Amanecer Agrario commanded a significant readership in rural Misiones. From June 1972 until November 1974, MAM printed eight thousand copies of each issue and then circulation dropped to six thousand. The newspaper appeared fortnightly, then monthly, and sporadically toward the end. A low price made it accessible. Initially, it cost one peso, but with inflation, the price increased to two, two and a half, and finally ten pesos. Twenty-nine issues of *Amanecer Agrario* appeared between June 1972 and October 1975, averaging between five to ten pages. The regular publication of readers’ letters confirms that people in the countryside read and engaged with the newspaper.

Eight months after MAM’s founding, the general assembly mandated the creation of both a newspaper and a radio program to facilitate communication with members. Estela Urdániz, who managed the newspaper, taught MAM members how to write articles. As MAM leader and Benedetti’s husband, Juan Carlos Berent, later recalled, “She gave form to the articles, diagramming everything. . . . And all of us, because don’t forget that we, the majority, were *colonos* and we wrote in our style. Hence, she made corrections, gave us themes, pointers so that we could develop the themes. And then she was in charge of doing the necessary corrections so that a good article emerged” (Korol 2012). Pablo Fernández Long explained that Urdániz did not write many articles herself; rather, “her work was to get others to write, based on a political discussion. More than the ability to write, she had the ability to inspire others to write. She sat with Pedro, with people who had never written an article, talking, chatting, for hours and hours, and when they finished all of the conversation, they went and wrote” (Korol 2012). Together with input from MAM’s Central Coordinating Commission, Urdániz determined the topics to be addressed in each issue.

Given her background, which included ties to the Peronist Left, Urdániz shaped *Amanecer Agrario* into a consciousness-raising tool for inciting change. Instead of entertainment pieces, the newspaper featured news and information about conditions affecting farmers in Misiones, along with MAM updates, editorials, letters from readers, several pages of advertisements, and two recurring columns. “Opinions of a Small Farmer” described the travails and injustices of farming in Misiones and how MAM was the mechanism for changing the situation. Taking the form of a letter by the famous gaucho Martín Fierro to Don Juan, the column was inherently masculine. In contrast, “The Rural Woman Speaks” addressed women. Starting with the sixteenth issue (August 1973), a horoscope contributed some entertainment value while promoting MAM’s agenda.

⁵ Oreste Pedro Peczak, “Editorial,” *Amanecer Agrario*, no. 1 (June 1972).

Under Urdániz's leadership from June 1972 to June 1974, only three of the twenty-two issues omitted "The Rural Woman Speaks."⁶ As Juana's letter from the beginning of the essay explained, the column differed from typical women's literature of the time. It did not provide recipes, beauty tips, or housekeeping advice. Instead, by publishing informative articles from female MAM leaders, along with readers' letters, the column fit with Peczak's description of the newspaper's goals. Articles educated readers about conditions that disadvantaged farmers, and letters demonstrated members' support.

Approximately half of the items published in "The Rural Woman Speaks" were written or overseen by MAM leaders. Urdániz probably chose not to publish under her own name because she was an outsider from Buenos Aires. Instead, she coordinated the column together with Benedetti. Benedetti signed the most articles (eleven) and was also an outsider, but readers identified with her because she grew up in a rural farming family and had married a farmer from Misiones.

Looking back, Benedetti explained that rural women's limited participation in MAM's early organizing efforts led to the creation of "The Rural Woman Speaks." "When we began the meetings in a community, you saw that everyone was gathered in a circle and that the males were seated. The woman stayed half standing, watching the children from the outside When the woman began to speak, her husband told her, 'you stay, don't go anymore to the meetings'" (Hendel 2007, 17–18). This experience motivated Benedetti to help create "The Rural Woman Speaks" to inspire rural women in Misiones to see themselves as equal to men and an important part of MAM. Benedetti remembered, "We didn't talk about 'gender,' but instead we spoke about equality between men and women" (Korol 2012). Likewise, Fernández Long confirmed: "It wasn't feminism. It was equality, serious participation" (Korol 2012). As a result, Benedetti found that after about a year, relationships between men and women began to change.

The idea of a space to talk about their lives and the difficulties they faced as farmers resonated with female readers. The large number of letters written by women (thirty-four), an average of more than one letter per issue, demonstrates that female readers were engaged with the newspaper and its contents. MAM leaders might have authored a few of the letters using a pseudonym of a common name like "María," but given the number of readily identifiable names, readers likely wrote most of the letters. Moreover, a number of authors explicitly identified the community where they resided.

What did womanhood mean for rural women?

"The Rural Woman Speaks" published two explicitly feminist articles written by outsiders. In the third issue, Judy Noceti, who identified herself as a "woman who has spent her life in a large city," tried to bridge rural and city women by explaining that both men and the establishment oppressed women through patriarchy and capitalism. Rather than focus on rural issues, Noceti critiqued the portrayal of women in advertising. She concluded by calling for women readers to reject being considered objects and to fight for equality with men.

Unlike Noceti, female letter writers did not feel a connection with urban women. Urban women engaged in self-beautification, fashion, and leisure activities that did not fit with rural life. When rural women complained about advertisements for beauty products, they did so not because of the objectification of women but because rural women couldn't afford such products and they weren't suitable for rural life. As María K. de Revinski explained, "while the magazines and newspapers teach how to apply makeup, apply this or that cream, sunbathe, go on vacation, we think about where to get a pullover or socks for the

⁶ The title sometimes varied slightly: "The Rural Woman of Misiones Speaks" or "The Rural Woman Speaks."

child who leaves very early for school, we think if we have anything to put in the pot for when they return and the husband from the field.”⁷

In October 1972, *Amanecer Agrario* published an even more radical feminist article by Movimiento de la Iglesia y Cambio en la Argentina. The article made no explicit reference to rural women or rural issues; instead, it discussed the Buenos Aires Femimundo exposition on fashion, beauty products, and domestic goods scheduled for the end of 1972. Argentine feminists mobilized against Femimundo. Youth from the Unión Feminista Argentina handed out feminist flyers at the event and the wealthy feminist activist María Luisa Bemberg used it as the basis for her film, *El mundo de la mujer*, which criticized businesses for objectifying modern Argentine women through marketing material goods (Vassallo 2005, 77; Trebisacce 2013b). In line with such criticisms, the article in *Amanecer Agrario* complained that Femimundo “reduces the woman to a body” and tries to sell beauty products, vacations, and other consumer goods rather than addressing the reality of the Argentine woman, which the article described as “a woman totally marginalized in decision making related to politics, economics, social, cultural, religious, etc.”⁸ Like Noceti’s earlier article, it did not bring up other feminist issues such as sex, sexuality or birth control.

Rural women also did not address such issues in their letters. Nor did they question the institution of marriage or the gendered division of labor—issues central to second-wave feminism. Instead, they embraced their identity as homemakers and caregivers, and they highlighted with pride their responsibilities as wives, mothers, and daughters. For example, Nelida and Rosa from Aristóbol del Valle explained that the *campesina* woman begins work at sunrise, feeding chickens and pigs, milking cows, and taking calves to pasture with their mothers: “Finishing this work, the woman goes to the house to prepare breakfast for the children, and generally mate for her husband. Then she goes to prepare the kids for school. If they are big, they get themselves ready, but if they are small, it is necessary to dress them. If the school is some kilometers away, it is necessary to wake them early, attend to everything, and accompany them some distance because small kids are sometimes afraid to cross the bits of forest.” They acknowledged that sometimes the father walked the children to school, but generally the mother did so.⁹

Letter writers like Nelida and Rosa took pride in their hard work and suffering: “The woman accompanies her husband in all of the tasks that allow for her efforts (you can’t say that she belongs to the weaker sex) because the authentic farming woman is used to the coarsest work.” As women, they considered themselves equal to men. They worked as hard as, if not harder than, men, and they emphasized that, unlike rural women in other provinces, they worked alongside their husbands or fathers in the fields. As Nelida and Rosa concluded, “[All *colonos*] are donkeys, just like their women, who are always enslaved; but today we say ENOUGH, the *campesina* woman is not a simple object of the land. She is a woman, and very woman, because she suffers and fights in silence together with her husband to preserve her home, so that her children are not hungry and can be educated.” In one of her two letters published in *Amanecer Agrario*, Paulina L. de Gilbert also described her farming and household tasks, and then summarized that “the responsibilities of work belong to all of my family, the responsibilities of the house belong to all.”¹⁰ Although Gilbert implied that rural men should help in the home, she refrained from specifically addressing what men should do.

⁷ María K. de Revinski, “Al director de *Amanecer Agrario*,” *Almanecer Agrario*, no. 6 (September 1972).

⁸ Movimiento Iglesia y Cambio en la Argentina, “Para pensar compañeras . . .,” *Amanecer Agrario*, no. 8 (October 1972).

⁹ Nelida and Rosa, “Amigas campesinas,” *Amanecer Agrario*, no. 4 (July 1972).

¹⁰ Paulina de Gilbert, “A nuestras compañeras,” *Amanecer Agrario*, no. 18 (December 1973).

Some women complained about unfair gender roles within the family. For example, Maria from Gral. Roca wrote: “Men in general demand, and consider with pleasure, that the woman should occupy herself only with the home. And they believe, and consider that the best woman is the one who goes out the least, who is not interested in what he does, and [he] admires her the most when, for example, [she] fulfills all of her female tasks, and has time left over to help him in the field, and according to him, it is even better when he comes home drunk from the *boliche* and he sees her conform without saying anything.”¹¹ Instead, Maria advocated that men and women should work together.

Indeed, female letter writers called for radical gender parity. They resoundingly agreed that rural women deserved an equal voice as men and should participate in decision-making both in the family and in their communities. As M. A. Sapper explained in her July 1972 letter: “While up to now women have been considered slaves of men, we should show that it is not true. That idea belongs to the past, when women did not have a voice nor vote nor their own decisions. Now it is different.”¹²

Many female letter writers emphasized that rural women should participate in MAM. Young women who identified as the daughters of farmers wrote a number of these letters. Rosa Klieger from Colonia Alberdi appealed to the agrarian youth: “Dearest female companions, do we not have to ‘meddle’ in the field, attached to the hoe or the tea harvester, at the side of our father, brother, or women together with their husbands? defending the stew [*defendiendo el puchero*]. Companions, we have to defend our work, our sweat, we have the same right as men.”¹³ As another daughter of farmers who worked together with her family in the field in Mbopicuá explained: “If we want to end the injustice, there is only one way to do so. With the unity of our union [MAM], being present in the meetings, collaborating in the form that each one can, staying alert and active, not leaving a few to do the work that is for all of us to do. Only in unity is there strength.”¹⁴

Some letters highlighted the obstacles that rural women had to overcome in order to participate in MAM. For example, Mari L. Zugel de Graunwal from Colonia Seguín explained that she had to take care of all of the animals, the house, and her three children while her husband prepared the meeting place. Then, to get to the meeting, she had to walk uphill six kilometers, carrying on her back her four year-old daughter with a fractured foot and in her arms her one-year-old. Many times, she returned home after the meeting after midnight. After putting the children to bed, Mari and her husband shared mate and talked for more than an hour “about the meeting, the decisions made, in sum, our future as a young married couple participating in MAM.”¹⁵

Female letter writers often complained about insufficient participation by other rural women. Rosa Klieger from Colonia Alberdi explained that she frequently invited girls and women to MAM meetings and gatherings, but some replied that “those aren’t things for girls or women; those who go and get involved in those things of men are only ‘meddling.’”¹⁶ Likewise, Mari L. Zugel de Graunwal from Colonia Seguín listed excuses women gave for not attending: needing to milk cows, children accustomed to going to sleep early, not understanding what was said in the meetings, not having a car, a husband not helping with the kids, and so on.¹⁷ Clearly, not all rural women agreed that womanhood meant active participation outside of the home.

¹¹ María del Gral. Roca, “La mujer rural tiene la palabra. Qué somos las mujeres en este mundo,” *Amanecer Agrario*, no. 14 (June 1973).

¹² M. A. Sapper, “La mujer participando del paro,” *Amanecer Agrario*, no. 4 (July 1972).

¹³ Rosa Klieger, “Qué piensan las mujeres del campo,” *Amanecer Agrario*, no. 10 (January 1973).

¹⁴ Inés Warken, “Señor Director de *Amanecer Agrario*,” *Amanecer Agrario*, no. 11 (February 1973).

¹⁵ Mari L. Zugel de Graunwal, “La mujer rural misionera tiene la palabra,” *Amanecer Agrario*, no. 19 (January 1974).

¹⁶ Rosa Klieger, “Qué piensan las mujeres del campo,” *Amanecer Agrario*, no. 10 (January 1973).

¹⁷ Zugel de Graunwal, “La mujer rural misionera tiene la palabra.”

In sum, rural womanhood meant being a wife, mother, and daughter, and for many, but not all, it also meant having a voice and participating in decision-making within both the family and the community, just like men. In addition to writing letters, rural women also participated in MAM's base communities, attending meetings and voicing their opinions. Some like Señora Ofelia Martínez and Teresa Boichuk, delegates from base communities, spoke publicly at MAM assemblies.¹⁸ Rural women also engaged in MAM protests where some, like Ana Ma. Koroluk, gave speeches.¹⁹ One of MAM's founders (Cecilia Feltan) was a woman. Her speech at MAM's first public gathering was one of the most applauded (Fernández Long, Berent, and Fernández Long 2019, 100), and as a member of the Central Coordinating Commission, she held one of MAM's highest leadership positions for several years. Clearly, rural women's participation in MAM was not limited to letter writing.

What did the people's spring mean for rural women?

At the most basic level, rural women worked with their *compañeros* and *compañeras* through MAM to try to improve farmers' lives regardless of gender. Only a minority of the female readers addressed their letters exclusively to other women (seven of thirty-four). Instead, female letter writers mostly addressed their colleagues using either *compañeros*, or *compañeros y compañeras*. Likewise, most of their letters discussed the realities facing farmers. As Elsa G. de Witzke from Garchapé described: "The monopolies have made themselves owners of our economy and the work of the farmer [*colono*] goes to the pocket of a few wealthy people at the cost of the hunger of a large number of poor people. There is too much injustice. The society in which we live is not human or Christian. It is scandalous."²⁰ María Eva Harrisberger explained what needed to be done in the newspaper's next issue: "All the *campesinos* know that the crisis that we are living has become unbearable and also we know that the only way to solve the problems of agriculture is to be united."²¹ Female letter writers believed that rural people needed to work together to demand better prices for their produce and they encouraged active participation in MAM.

While their complaints focused on low prices for agricultural goods, female letter writers also addressed other issues. They criticized limited educational opportunities, poor health care, and bad roads. Erna Elena Arndt from Campo Grande wrote about how the company Daca Argentina defrauded her family when they purchased an agricultural machine.²² Paulina de Gilbert from Campo Viera complained about how the staff at her local post office refused to attend customers until late in the day.²³ Just as women exposed problems, they drew attention to special efforts by individuals. For example, Ilze M. Malender of El Porvenir applauded Pedro Lachuk's generosity in donating money to cover transportation costs and support MAM, and Ines T. de Romanovich from Picada Galitziana praised how Mr. Knebel, the mayor of Andrade, had fixed the roads.²⁴ Even though women appreciated the space provided by "The Rural Woman Speaks," their letters expanded beyond its confines. Almost an equal number of letters from women were

¹⁸ "Día del agricultor en Campo Viera," *Amanecer Agrario*, no. 24 (November 1974).

¹⁹ "El MAM no duerme," *Amanecer Agrario*, no. 19 (January 1974).

²⁰ Elsa G. de Witzke, "Compañeros del agro," *Amanecer Agrario*, no. 6 (September 1972).

²¹ María Eva Harrisberger, "Buscar el bien comunitario," *Amanecer Agrario*, no. 7 (September 1972).

²² Erna Elena Arndt, "Carta de los lectores," *Amanecer Agrario*, no. 4 (July 1972).

²³ Paulina de Gilbert, "Deficiencia en el correo local," *Amanecer Agrario*, no. 14 (June 1973).

²⁴ Ilze M. Malender, "De Jardín América," *Amanecer Agrario*, no. 16 (August 1973); Inés T. de Romanovich, "Digno de ejemplo," *Amanecer Agrario*, no. 22 (June 1974).

published in the column as were published outside of the column. Their published words established them as active participants in their communities.

The different terms that rural women used for describing themselves reveal divisions among rural people and the limits of the people's spring. During the first six months of publication, most female authors called themselves *campesinas*, with a number of them simultaneously calling themselves *colono* or *agricultor*. *Campesino* was also a politicized term that encompassed all oppressed rural people. Likely, many female letter writers like Juana identified themselves as a *mujer campesina* early on to indicate that they felt part of the broad movement to improve conditions in the countryside. But after six months, female letter writers no longer tended to call themselves *campesinas*, most likely because of the term's politicized connotations and their strong identification as rural farmers. In contrast, Benedetti continued to use the term in her articles. More frequently, female letter writers identified themselves as *agricultores* or *productores*, terms that more accurately described MAM members. But female letter writers most frequently described themselves as *colono*, or sometimes as the daughter of *colonos*. These terms expose ethnic and class divides. *Colono* implied European ethnicity, and along with *agricultor* and *productor*, it meant farmer and did not include rural workers or peons who tended to be browner, often mestizos with ties to Paraguay and Brazil.

While small- and medium-sized farmers in Misiones had affinity because they felt sidelined by large producers, exploited by the industrial companies that bought their products, and forgotten by the government, economic divides still existed. Small producers owned less than twenty-five hectares and were less able to accumulate capital and invest than medium producers owning between twenty-five and one hundred hectares (Bartolomé 1982, 32–33). The divide between the two intensified when Urdániz, Benedetti and her husband, Fernández Long, and other more politicized activists wanted to extend MAM's efforts beyond its sectoral focus on Misiones farmers' economic interests. They pushed base communities to discuss and explore the roots of broader economic and social problems such as insufficient medical attention, limited educational opportunities, poor roads, and lack of electricity. They wanted MAM to become part of the broader effort to transform society and the prevailing economic system. These efforts accelerated with the 1973 elections that brought Héctor Cámpora to power and led to Juan Perón's return to Argentina, followed by his rise to the presidency and the suppression of the Peronist Left. When Perón returned to Argentina in June 1973, Benedetti, Urdániz, and Fernández Long went to the Ezeiza airport with the Peronist Left to greet him, and Fernández Long later admitted that both he and Urdániz had already joined the Montoneros (Fernández Long, Berent, and Fernández Long 2019, 129 and 141).

Two months later, in August 1973, "The Rural Woman Speaks" published an article that pushed readers to become more radicalized, asserting that MAM had reached "deepening and mobilizing," a new stage of much greater importance: "Gatherings, strikes, stoppages, etc.; these actions were appropriate for that moment, but with that alone we won't be able to cut the problem at the root, so we created a program where the problems most felt in the communities emerged: commodities, education, retirement, credit, and many other problems that the *colono* suffers. Why do those problems exist? Those problems exist because a few are owners of all and exploit the working people." In other words, deepening and mobilizing the movement entailed moving beyond focusing on the prices of agricultural goods and problems specific to farmers. It meant fighting against injustices that afflicted lower classes in general. The article severely criticized those who were not involved in MAM activities, calling them "women who seem to have sawdust in their head instead of a brain." Unlike other "The Rural Woman Speaks" articles, this one was unsigned. Furthermore, it mentioned the term *farmer* only once. In doing so, the article

sought to broaden connections. It concluded with a call to fight against injustice and for a better life for Argentine people.²⁵

Benedetti followed up such ideas in subsequent articles.²⁶ She and other more radical MAM members called for the movement to expand its efforts. They organized community discussions to raise consciousness. This agenda was controversial. Moderates worried that the movement was becoming too political and radicalized, and that it risked becoming revolutionary. They claimed that Pablo Fernández Long and Estela Urdániz were trying to hijack the movement. As outsiders, not from Misiones, both were easy targets.

Younger and more politicized small farmers tended to want the movement to extend its focus to address deeper structural problems, while farmers with medium-sized farms generally wanted MAM to maintain its sectoral focus on raising prices for rural goods produced in Misiones. Tensions between the two groups intensified. Teresa Boichuk explained that when she complained, as the delegate from her base community, about the low price producers received for their yerba mate, one of the radical MAM leaders responded that people could not pay more for yerba. Regarding another issue, she was told to solve the problem herself because “we live close to the asphalt and are medium-sized colonos.”²⁷ The divided vision for MAM and animosity culminated in more activist leaders losing the 1974 elections for MAM’s Central Coordinating Commission. As a result, Benedetti, Urdániz, Fernández Long, and others left MAM to form Ligas Agrarias de Misiones (LAM). MAM continued to function until the 1976 military coup, albeit with a narrow focus on prices. While *Amanecer Agrario* stopped publishing “The Rural Woman Speaks,” it continued to publish letters from women and Benedetti and Urdániz included the column in the single issue of LAM’s newspaper (Korol 2012).

Conclusion

In April 1975, Fernández Long and José Figueredo became the only members of the Montoneros political party (the Partido Peronista Auténtico, PA) elected to political office. Part of the radical Peronist Left, the Montoneros were best known for their clandestine guerrilla movement, but in 1975, they formed the PA to work within the government. MAM was vital to their election as deputies. Both Fernández Long and Figueredo had links with MAM, and votes for the PA were strongest in rural zones where MAM had influence. As voters, rural women played an important role in the election (Andrade 2000). In December, Isabel Perón’s government declared the PA illegal, and both MAM and LAM disbanded when the military took power. Many members were imprisoned, tortured, and killed. Urdániz was disappeared, Benedetti was tortured and imprisoned for over seven years, and Fernández Long went into exile.

MAM’s influence continues to be felt in Misiones. MAM returned with democracy, and in 2009, rural interests launched a political party, Partido Agrario y Social (PAyS), in Misiones. It became the only province with members of an agrarian political party elected to office. In the 2017 legislative elections, PAyS won over 12 percent of the vote.²⁸ PAyS subsequently joined with smaller parties to form the Frente Encuentro Popular Agrario y Social para la Victoria. In 2019, Hector “Cacho” Barbaro was elected as one of the seven

²⁵ “La mujer rural misionera tiene la palabra,” *Amanecer Agrario*, no. 16 (August 1973).

²⁶ Susana B. de Berent, “La mujer rural misionera tiene la palabra,” *Amanecer Agrario*, no. 21 (April 1974); Susi, “La mujer rural misionera tiene la palabra,” *Amanecer Agrario*, no. 22 (June 1974).

²⁷ Teresa E. G. de Boichuk, “Hemos perdido un año en nuestra luchas,” *Amanecer Agrario*, no. 23 (August 1974).

²⁸ “Elecciones 2017—Misiones: mirá los resultados en tu provincial,” *La Nación*, October 23, 2017. <https://www.lanacion.com.ar/politica/elecciones-2017-misiones-mira-los-resultados-en-tu-provincia-nid2074744/>.

deputies representing Misiones, and in 2021, three of its members were elected as representatives at the provincial level, including one woman.²⁹

This article has demonstrated how rural women in northeastern Argentina participated in social activism during the early 1970s. Their desire to improve rural farmers' lives led them to join MAM, which created a space to voice their experiences, concerns, and aspirations in the column "The Rural Woman Speaks." In their letters, rural women celebrated their caregiving role as mothers, wives, and daughters, and they employed the moral authority associated with those roles to legitimate voicing their opinions and participating in decision-making in their families and communities. The letters also exposed divisions among rural farmers: some wanted MAM to stay focused on issues related exclusively to agriculture, while others wanted to extend the movement to deal with broader structural problems. Ultimately, the former triumphed, but through it all, rural women actively participated in MAM.

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²⁹ Dario Guimaraez, "Cacho Bárbaro y el acuerdo electoral con el Frente de Todos," *Misiones Online*, July 24, 2019, <https://misionesonline.net/2019/07/24/cacho-barbaro-acuerdo-electoral-frente-todos-difícil-decirle-no-al-candidato-presidente/>; "Misiones: El oficialismo obtuvo una amplia victoria en las elecciones legislativas," *Perfil*, July 6, 2021, <https://www.perfil.com/noticias/politica/misiones-el-oficialismo-obtuvo-una-amplia-victoria-en-las-elecciones-legislativas.phtml>.

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