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## **WHEN WOMEN SAY ENOUGH IS ENOUGH: THE STRUGGLE FOR DRINKING WATER IN VILLA JARDIN, ARGENTINA.**

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*This paper analyzes subaltern women’s involvement in collective actions to obtain a vital resource: drinking water. The case study proposed is based on the experience of Villa Jardín, in the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area (Argentina), with 60% of its 20,000 inhabitants deprived of their basic needs.*

*My main hypothesis is that women’s role in guaranteeing the collection and distribution of community resources was the factor that prompted their passage from the domestic to the public space. On the one hand, this jeopardized their own positioning in the sphere of domesticity, but on the other, this passage allowed women to carry out actions that resulted in the reconstruction of the community’s social fabric and the improvement of the quality of life. Thus, women’s social practices provided democratic forms of organization and participation that contributed to the visibilization and empowerment of the organizations that they generated.*

*During the decade of 1990, a group of neighbors (women and men) organized themselves to design and fight for the installation of the drinking water and sewage network. Working in association with a NGO, the provincial government, and the concessionaire company, Aguas Argentinas S.A, the neighbors of Villa Jardín achieved a successful result, that was also innovative as a social practice.*

*On the one hand, the community was successful in achieving the installation of the network in a time period much shorter than the one originally designed by the concessionaire. On the other, the project’s control and management was left to the community. Particularly, to the women in the community.*

*To understand this case, I have analyzed both the reasons that led women to participate in the project, and the ways in which they participated, as well as their scope and limits. Based on a gender analysis of collective memory, the work I present here is mainly based on oral history.*

*Key words: Argentina; drinking water; women and collective actions; oral history*

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### **INTRODUCTION**

This paper analyzes subaltern women’s involvement in collective actions to obtain a vital resource: drinking water. The case study is based on the experience of Villa Jardín, located in the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area, in Argentina.

My main hypothesis is that women’s role in guaranteeing the collection and distribution of community resources was the factor that prompted their passage from the domestic to the public space. On the one hand, this jeopardized their own positioning in the sphere of domesticity; but on the other, this passage allowed women to carry out actions that resulted in the reconstruction of the community’s social fabric and the improvement of the quality of life. Thus, women’s social practices provided democratic forms of organization and participation that contributed to the visibilization and empowerment of the organizations that they generated.

Villa Jardín is an urban settlement in the province of Buenos Aires, with 60% of its 20,000 inhabitants lacking basic needs. Overcrowding, lack of public services and adequate health services, high unemployment levels, among others, are inherent features of the life experience in this neighborhood.

However, when deprivation became critical in the late 1980s, a group of neighbors (women and men) organized themselves to design and fight for the installation of the drinking water and sewage network. Working in association with an NGO –the Fundación el Riachuelo-, the provincial government, and the concessionaire company, *Aguas Argentinas S.A.*, the neighbors of Villa Jardín achieved success, and innovated social practices.

On the one hand, the community was successful in completing the installation of the network in a much shorter time period than the one originally designed by the concessionaire. On the other, the project's control and management was left to the community. Particularly, to the women in the community.

Thus, it was women who established the work and organization forms for the project's management, and it was women who stipulated the participation criteria for all social actors involved. In fact, they are currently the community referents for the external and internal organizations and institutions of Villa Jardín. Currently, Villa Jardín women monitor the development of similar projects in other settlements of Greater Buenos Aires, and they guarantee the continuity of neighborhood organizing in view of new projects, acting as mediators in neighborhood conflicts.

To understand this case, I have analyzed both the reasons that led women to participate in the project, and the ways in which they participated, as well as its scope and limits. Based on a gender analysis of collective memory, the work I present here is mainly based on oral history, with interviews to female and male neighbors of Villa Jardín, members of the company *Aguas Argentinas S.A.*, and of the NGO working inside the neighborhood –Fundación el Riachuelo-, the municipal government of Lanús, and the provincial officials and representatives of the Ente Tripartito de Obras y Servicios Sanitarios (ETOSS).

## **HISTORICAL CONTEXT:**

Argentina is a multiethnic country located in southern South America, with approximately 36 million people. It is a large country characterized by geographical and climatic variety that results in a wide range of natural resources. It is a federal, representative Republic, with a centralized National Executive embodied in the President, who is elected every four years. The Legislature is comprised of the Chamber of Representatives and the Chamber of Senators, also elected by popular vote. The Judiciary is elected by the Legislature.

The population is mainly concentrated in urban centers, particularly in the Federal District and the Greater Buenos Aires area, that comprises a third of the country's inhabitants.

This settlement pattern has had an impact on nation-state building, resulting in a unique feature of Argentina's historical and social development vis-à-vis other Latin American countries. Indeed, although by the turn of the nineteenth century, Argentina became part of the international capitalist market as an agricultural producer, the impact of the city and port of Buenos Aires in international trade, its importance as the center of government and finance, as well as the subsidiary industries that developed in the wake of agribusiness (such as meatpacking plants), turned the province of Buenos Aires and the Federal District in a focus of migrants and immigrants, both from other regions of the country and from European countries (particularly Italy and Spain).

This process continued into the 1930s due to the consequences of the 1929 crash. The latter pushed the rural population to the cities, and forced thousands of people from neighboring countries –whose economies had suffered even more than Argentina's (such as Paraguay, Bolivia, or Uruguay)– to settle in Buenos Aires. The industrializing policies fostered by dominant sectors favored this process, aimed at satisfying the needs of the domestic market by substituting basic goods which had previously been imported, thus increasing the need of industrial labor force.

In the mid-1940s, the rise of Peronism marked the strengthening of the industrialization model via a State's planning-interventionist policy. This went hand in hand with a significant improvement of life, work, and

organizational conditions for the subaltern sectors, particularly the working class. Through a strong alliance with trade unions, the national bourgeoisie, and the Army, the Peronist government engaged in a strong redistributionist policy, increasing employment levels and participation of the public sector in the productive system. Seeking to develop a social order based on “class conciliation,” several factors contributed to the origins of a strong identification of the working class with Peronism: an extensive social legislations, including end-of-the-year bonuses, paid holidays, maternity leave, compensations, as well as the extension of the education and health systems, access to housing, and the engagement of “workers” as main actors in the creation of a country with “social justice, economic sovereignty, and political independence.” This continued for several decades, even in spite of several military coups, and policies favoring capital concentration and transnationalization, after the fall of Juan Domingo Perón in September, 1955.

However, the organic crisis that ensued, characterized by an asymmetry between the economic power of the monopolic bourgeoisie, and its incapacity to generate a stable hegemony over subaltern sectors –who were highly mobilized and organized, particularly with the rise of class-based, anti-bureaucratic, and militant trade unions in the late 1960s, and the emergence of political organizations that challenged the capitalist system– was only solved by the 1976 military coup. The latter carried out a brutal repression that left 30,000 disappeared people, and meant the triumph of international capital’s financing sectors, which began the dismantling of the Welfare State.

It was not until the 1990s that the impact of these policies worsened, resulting in a process of intense socioeconomic and political transformations, linked to the strengthening of the neo-liberal model.

During the two consecutive terms of President Carlos Saúl Menem (1989-1999), the dominant sectors set the basis of the model: deregulation and liberalization of the economy, together with a great financial and commercial open-door policy; labor reform, focused on flexibilization of work relations and labor instability; and finally, the privatization of public utilities as part of the State’s structural reform. The latter included the State’s retreat from its protective and social security functions, and their decentralization.

The Convertibility Plan of the Minister of Economy Domingo Cavallo, launched in 1991, resulted, on the one hand, in the collapse of the remaining industrial structure, and the dismantling of what was left of the Welfare State. On the other, it raised unemployment, poverty, and social vulnerability to levels hitherto unknown in Argentina.

In this sense, the dismantling of the State’s social protection functions resulted in a vacuum that was tentatively bridged by the activation of community networks. During the 1990s, and under the label of poverty reduction programs, the national political leadership together with international agencies, raised the banner of self-help, self-reliance, and autonomy vis-à-vis the State. Thus, they set forth mechanisms that sought to mitigate the consequences of structural adjustment. These consisted in delegating the State’s social responsibility to community action and volunteer organizations, oriented through the intervention of NGOs, grassroots organizations, and/or professional groups.<sup>1</sup> A disastrous rhetoric ensued, masked by the discourses of “active citizenship” and “empowerment:” the social sectors that had been disciplined by the “market regulating framework,” were then free to become the owners of their own destinies. Thus, those who had suffered the effects of economic deregulation, free circulation of capital, labor flexibilization, alarming unemployment levels, were made responsible as well of the management of soup kitchens, day-care centers, training and job workshops for daily survival, health access, and the construction of the necessary infrastructure for the provision of public services such as electricity, gas, telephone, and the running-water and sewage system.

But this burden involved a deep gender bias. Inasmuch as many of these survival tasks were viewed as an extension of women’s “natural” activities in the domestic sphere, women were called upon to participate in them. This would result in the reinforcement of the double subordination of women of the popular sectors, while alleviating the State’s social responsibilities. In spite of that, occupying their position as community

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<sup>1</sup> Report on world development, 2000/2001. Fighting against Poverty, General Overview, World Bank, Washington, D.C.

caretakers (Kaplan) strengthened women's central role in Villa Jardín in weaving together social solidarity networks, managing the community's resources, grassroots organizing, and their mobilization capacity. It was there, "sharing the tasks of their class and their community" (Kaplan, op cit: 269), and claiming the rights born of the assigned responsibility to preserve life, that these women turned their individual problem in collective claims and practices.

### THE LOCAL SCENARIO: OF PRIVATIZATIONS AND "UNPRIVATIZATIONS"

Villa Jardín<sup>2</sup> is an urban settlement located, since 1940, in the gaps of the urban layout, along the old bed of the river Matanza, which after its rectification was called Riachuelo. It belongs to the district of Lanús, in the greater Buenos Aires area.

The settlement demanded a land-filling and this fact was crucial for the inhabitant's quality of life, since the river is highly polluted. The consequences of this, especially in terms of health, are widely recognized by the region's inhabitants. According to female neighbor "The river is the main polluter in the area, but I don't know if something can be done about it. It has an impact on health. Above all, you feel it more in the summer, because of the heat. I mean, the Riachuelo stinks, specially at night, it smells awful. So, may be it doesn't smell very badly, but it affects children. As people are so used to living like that, they don't pay much attention, but I know it has an impact on them. Maybe, when the children grow up, they will have problems. The river is an important polluter in the area. It has quite an impact on people, and besides, there are rats, the rats that live there, in the Riachuelo. One season, they cleaned all that and instead of clearing the place of rats.... they did nothing, they only cleaned the bushes and the rats came into the houses. The Town Hall was informed about it, which is also a problem, isn't it?(...)"

This is therefore, the great paradox of Villa Jardín's inhabitants: what characterizes the area is not lack of water as a material asset, but rather their impossibility of using water in healthy conditions sustainable for human life.

Villa Jardín includes 20,000 inhabitants distributed on 38 hectares. They are merged in a closed urban environment, with a very high demographic density and poor basic public services. This *villa miseria* (shanty town) has the highest rate of UBN (Unsatisfied Basic Needs) households in the district of Lanús. To be precise, 68.8% of Villa Jardín's households fall under the UBN category. As regards dwelling and overcrowding, the most critical levels in the district can also be found in this area, overcrowding amounting to 13.5%, with 60.6% of the dwellings in poor household conditions.<sup>3</sup>

Villa Jardín includes many migrants from the northern region of Argentina and neighboring countries (Bolivia and Paraguay). And the community has a long history of political involvement, both in left-wing and Peronist parties, and in Christian grassroots organizations. In this sense, Villa Jardín's inhabitants have accumulated a strong experience in political organizing and mobilization. Thus, when life conditions were dangerously threatened by the conditions fostered in the 1980s and 1990s, it was this long political practice that helped the approximately 3,000 neighbors to organize, plan, and finally get a drinking water and sewage system for Villa Jardín.

The group of people that fostered the project lived in a part of the shanty town (comprising four blocks) that were not contemplated in the area serviced by water companies, nor was it included in the expansion plan of Aguas Argentinas for the first five-year period of the concession (1993-1998)<sup>4</sup>. Rather, the installation of the

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<sup>2</sup> *Villa*: comes from *Villa Miseria*, the name given in Argentina (equivalent to shantytown, *favela*, etc.) to the non-regulated occupation of vacant lots in the urban layout, as a result of migrations from the countryside to the city which started in the 1940s.

<sup>3</sup> INDEC, 1991 census data.

<sup>4</sup> In 1993, through a public bid, the State granted the 30-year concession of drinking water and sewage systems for the city of Buenos Aires and 13 municipalities of Greater Buenos Aires to Aguas Argentinas S.A., a consortium led by the French company Lyonnaise des Eaux. This included 8 million people. The concession agreement established that the

drinking water network was included in the plans for the following five-year period 2003-2008. However, by early 1999, the 584 families involved in the community project succeeded in having drinking water, albeit not the sewage system.

As regards female participation in the process, women's leading role was essential for the success of the community organizational and management model. Women were key to also in stipulating the community criteria that would give access to external institutions into the neighborhood, and their work proposals for Villa Jardín. In this sense, women established the ways in which these institutions were going to work in the community's social fabric, and they also build the necessary reliability networks between those institutions and the neighbors, articulating meeting and working parameters.

How, and based on what identity women got publicly involved in this project; why they did so; what previous experience they had to be capable of this actions; what obstacles they encountered; and what new identities were forged as a result of their involvement, are some of the questions that have guided my work.

## **COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION AND FEMALE LEADERSHIP:**

### **THE VALUE OF DRINKING WATER AND THE MANAGEMENT MODEL:**

The project of installing the drinking water system began in 1993, when members of Fundación el Riachuelo started to work with a sector of Villa Jardín that included around 3,000 inhabitants.

The planning development for this experience was based on a criterion of multiple alliances and permanent training of all actors involved, both of state agencies and national and international institutions, as well as those belonging to the community of Villa Jardín.

This strategy was reinforced by means of "negotiation tables" that were formed at different levels:

**"Concertation Tables"**: to deal with issues related to the Project. Its members were: Lanús Town Hall, Lanús Legislative Council, Aguas Argentinas S.A., ETOSS (Sanitation Works and Services Tripartite Body), the Associates Commission of Banco Credicoop, the construction company ALSA S.A (that carried out the works), the citizens who were members of Neighborhood Units and the Fundación el Riachuelo as animator.

**"Cooperation for Development Table"**: made up of the national and international agencies that have supported the process, such as the Province of Buenos Aires, through the International Cooperation Unit, the French region of Midi Pyrenees, the Association of Cooperation between Actors for Development (ACAD), la Caisse des Depots et Consignations (CDC), the Basque government, and the Fundación el Riachuelo.

**"Community Conflict Mediation Table"** in which citizens put forward their problems and solutions are found. The conflicting parties are neighbors in general, technicians and/or professional personnel representing the Fundación and "friendly mediators", such as the "Cristo Redentor" Parish priest.

On a financial level, the Project was implemented under the legal definition of "co-financing" by means of which all the "Concertation Table" actors provided financing for the project. There were also indirect subsidies for the population, although no direct subsidies. The Town Hall of Lanús granted tax exemptions as a contribution to financing the project and the population of Villa Jardín collected the money among the families

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concessionaire should commit to carry out an investment program based on five-year plans to extend the service and provide drinking water and sewage systems to those 8 million inhabitants.

to pay for the labor used in building the network (which amounted to 33% of the project's total cost). Thus, the works began on November 24, 1997 and were finished on March 25, 1998.

However, to understand how the project was carried out and the reasons why women got involved, it is necessary to analyze the meaning different social actors assigned to drinking water as a social good.

The basic principle established in Dublin in 1992 defines water as a right (Aristizábal: 2000). However, this right is defined in multiple ways, since each actor attributes different meanings to it. The neighbors of Villa Jardín said that: "(...) any citizen has the right... For me, yes, it is essential, it is one's life, a human being need. If not, how do people wash, clean themselves, what do they do if they have kids?... Water makes a difference, water, electricity are very important everywhere (...). For me, water is more important than electricity, you know. But for me everything is necessary, water above all (...)"

In the same sense, a woman added: "I believe it is (a right) just like having food every day ... That is why I think that they cannot cut Aguas Argentinas even if people don't pay. We had the right to have water, but nobody came to give us water..."

For Aguas Argentinas S.A officials, water is also a special asset, and securing drinking water impacts directly on the improvement of people's quality of life. As one of the Company's members recalled: "(...) Water is not just a service like any other, because water is an essential and basic need for life. So, it can hardly be considered a service like the other public services. (...) Now, of that group of services, water is the most essential of those resources and an unsafe access to water has a direct impact not only on the quality of life but also on the health and survival possibilities of the communities (...)"

An ETTOS official agreed with this appreciation: "(...) people who can't benefit from the services are the poorest, and that is an objective fact, you can see it, prove it... this service has been essential for life. Nobody should be left out. If there is a service in relation to which one should talk about universality, I mean about which one talks about universality, the concept of service universality should be applied (...). Water is an essential asset for life, (...) because having water entails many benefits for one's health. Also if we talk about sanitation. That is to say, that the relationship between water and sanitation, sewers ... and diseases is very close. Studies have been made that show that health expenditure greatly decreases when there are sewers, and it is better to have them because, in a way, they prevent health expenditures and medical assistance is not required. This fact places this service in a special category."

Several issues arise from the comparison of these testimonies. First, it seems there is an agreement regarding the importance of water in people's quality of life. In this sense, water is a priority asset vis-à-vis other basic assets. However, and as an asset, water is assigned different meanings. These are related to the social relations in which each actor is rooted and to the institutional levels they represent. Thus, it is important to point out a distinction, which is the one established by the actors between right and service.

For Villa Jardín's neighbors, drinking water acquires the condition of a **right**, and as such, it is inalienable. That is why for some of them, securing drinking water should not be subject to the people's ability to pay for it. Moreover, this is closely related to the way in which water was obtained in previous times, since it was the duty of the State to provide the network system and drinking water to every person who lacked it. Thus the ETOSS' member insistence on the legitimate universality of the claim.

The consciousness of water provision as a citizen's right is a theoretical construction that emerged as a result of a historical process of social interaction between the Fundación el Riachuelo and the neighbor's community of Villa Jardín. In fact, this concept framed the working strategy that the Fundación implemented in the neighborhood, allowed this NGO to define the identity of poverty. According to Enrique Lavigne, the Fundación's president:

*"(the concept of citizenship) starts, in the first place, in the Fundación, when trying to recover in a way the history of political activism, and searching to give a different answer to the problem of poverty. That is to say*

that the task of the so-called "development policies," "development aid" and so on is mainly determined -at an international and national level- by the idea of helping the poor. And the poor become the object of these processes and are specifically called "target group," "target population." We reject all that and try to recover these communities' positioning as the actors they have always been, convinced that people have a huge capacity to face these processes even though they are chronically disqualified by the political power, the churches, by political cultures -even from the left- who also question people's capacity. "(...) the concept of citizenship as we understand it is not a notion derived from Congressional politics. Congressional politics is one aspect. (...) In fact, the concept of citizenship we refer to is a concept which originates in the post-war period, with the Human Rights Letter and was born with the birth of the United Nations. (...) What we understand is that people living in Villa Jardín have limited rights. There are rights they do not have access to. Then, we began referring to this issue as a restriction of rights. And we repeat it in all forums: we work with the people not because they are poor but because they are citizens whose rights, as a social group, have been restricted, as women due their gender status, as children due to their status as children, as native population due to their status as natives, because their rights have been restricted. The interesting political action is to recover a vision according to which these people stand as actors and start negotiating their rights. And this would be the way towards a democratic management of human resources, of human capabilities, of economic capabilities, and would lead to a dialogue with economic actors from a different stance. (...)"

Thus, instead of viewing shantytown dwellers as passive actors who are recipients of social welfare policies, they stressed their skills, history and capacities to get what they were entitled to.

To understand the social implications derived from this definition, we must consider that the way in which a basic social need --from which the reproduction of human life depends-- is fulfilled, is not exclusively linked to the natural-biological aspect. On the contrary, it is a social construction. This means that the way in which people fulfill their needs is conditioned by the historical context, the values and norms that are present in any social organization, the class and gender power relations, among other factors. That is why the claiming of a right may assume different forms and it may be carried out with different purposes. In fact, the use a social actor makes of the concept of citizen rights comes from a theoretical production that reveals the actor's organizing experience, his/her socio-economic and political reality, the assessment of his/her status, and the present and past material, cultural and historical conditionings. This, in turn, shows the actor's production of meaning about the social relations in which he/she is immersed.

Therefore, if we take into account the socio-economic, political, cultural and even geographical-territorial conditions of Villa Jardín's inhabitants, the use of the concept of citizenship redefined their position vis-à-vis the rest of the social actors. This relocation provided a different content of legitimacy that supported their claim and a solution to their collective needs. This issue is very important. The privatization of water services implied, among other things, a change in the rules of the game regarding the relationship basic services supply / society, in as much as the private company is perceived as having a behavioral logic and a set of interests different from those of the State.

In this sense, for Aguas Argentinas, even though the provision of drinking water is also considered a service and an "essential need for life" that impacts directly on community survival, as the fulfillment of that need, it also becomes an alienable social asset, because Aguas Argentinas logic follows the concept of gains and the search of benefits. This is evident in the following testimony of a company official: "(...) and besides, if there are five million people who lack drinking water and one million people live in slightly better conditions due to their income, and four million are in a bad economic situation, I believe a service company of international standards must know that not only part of the population has problems but also that there is a market for (the company) <sup>5</sup>. Therefore, they have to see the problem, analyze it and come up with solutions so that these sectors can have access to services while the company continues to be a profitable business. Because, all in all, a company is still a company and it must have profits. Obviously, one can later discuss about the level of profits and incomes the company should have. But what we must not forget is that profit earning is a sine-qua-non

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<sup>5</sup> The informant refers to Aguas Argentinas S.A.

condition for a company to exist. Profit earning is fundamental. If a company stops making profits it stops being a company, it becomes something else (...).”

Therefore, water is an essential good, but it is also a **service** supplied to a “client” and not to a “user.” Highlighting this term is not capricious, since it accounts for the different meanings attached to this service when provided either by the State or by a private company. For the latter, water supply is subject to profitability, and water –although considered an essential resource– becomes rather a commodity. Thus, the service is provided within this logic, as long as the profitability rate is guaranteed. This has implied the conflict between, at least, two logics. First, the Company’s logic. Second, the logic of Villa Jardín’s population, who even claimed that the possibility of having drinking water should not be subject to their payment capacity.

In sum, the privatization of water services brought about, among other things, a change in the ways claims and negotiations were carried out by suppliers and recipients. Thus, the claims to drinking water as a **citizenship right** facilitated the partial destructuring of the business logic. It provided a conceptual tool that allowed to engage the Company, and even the state agencies, in a scenario of collective solutions, in which community needs and claims would become primordial. Under these terms, the concept of citizenship allowed to render visible the heterogeneity of subjects and social groups, contesting the abstract universalism that conflates the specific experiences of the bourgeois or middle-class male with that of all human beings as such.<sup>6</sup>

This had a huge impact in the management model itself. Taking as an example the work of concertation tables, spaces are built as a social and institutional meeting space, where the different actors who participate of the management process can meet face to face, and are able to talk, discuss, negotiate, agree. However, this space is far from being neutral, or exempt of conflict. We might conceive it as a scenario where hegemonic relations in the distribution and exercise of power in social relations are made evident and put into play. Thus, the working table generates its own logic about the type of management, in which every actor involved is symbolically located on the same level. In other words, a sense of equality is promoted regarding participation, without subverting or contesting, in principle, the class and gender components that frame social inequality between different actors, or amongst them.

This symbolic equality, however, made possible for the women of Villa Jardín, a distinct experience of visibilization, and their recognition as active subjects with their own voices. Indeed, the improvement of the community’s quality of life through this type of management, demanded strong commitment, organization, and consciousness levels. Thus, the neighbors created two types of associations. On the one hand, the Neighbors Committee, which comprised all those living in the four blocks involved in the project, and which decided, through direct democratic participation, upon the proposals that had to be carried out by the community representatives working in the concertation table. On the other hand, Neighborhood Units. The Neighborhood Unit<sup>7</sup> is the association of neighbors who share a corridor. It constitutes a space where they debate community problems regarding several issues related to the improvement of the quality of life. They advance solutions, and they take action to carry out the proposals agreed upon. It is formed with a Constitution Act and it functions democratically, through consensus reached in the assembly of neighbors. Also, it has a formal representative elected by the neighbors themselves, who is in charge of making an updated list of the families that are members of the Neighborhood Unit (the number is not regular); managing and representing the Unit to install the basic public services; taking action before the public authorities and private agencies, and to request mediation for the solution of conflicts and differences. On the other hand, as an essential factor, we believe that the originality of this form of organization resides not only in its internal workings but also in the nature of the Unit’s acknowledgement vis-à-vis non-community actors. In fact, this form of organization has been accepted

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<sup>6</sup> There is a lot written on the topic in Feminist historiography. See, AAVV: *También somos ciudadanas*. Instituto Universitario de Estudios de la Mujer, Universidad Autónoma de Madrid. España: 2000; Fraser, Nancy: *Justicia Interrumpida. Reflexiones críticas desde la posición postsocialista*. Siglo del Hombre Ed.: 1997; Castells, Carme (ed.): *Perspectivas feministas en teoría política*. Paidós: 1996. Mouffe, Chantal: “Feminism, Citizenship and Radical Democratic Politics”, in: Butler, J.; Scott, Joan: *Feminists theorize the political*. New York, Routledge: 1992.

<sup>7</sup> Today there are 103 Neighborhood Units that include 584 families that represents a population of 3000 inhabitants. 40 are led by women.



by the government and by the concessionaire as a tool with a juridical status to carry out the process of regularizing the supply of drinking water. Also, Aguas Argentinas does not send individual billings to the neighbors of each unit. On the contrary, billing is made out to the Neighborhood Unit.

But building the project's organizational and legal pillars was not an easy task. More so if we take into account that those who received the claims and the community centers of negotiation and contestation were social actors with a differential and superior class and institutional power (the Company, the municipal government), with a male leadership. It was neighborhood women's participation that facilitated the task. Therefore, it is necessary to analyze how and why did women participate and lead this project, and what was their actions scope and impact.

#### WHEN WOMEN SAY ENOUGH:

Although neighbors (men and women) consider that in some periods of the project development the participation of men and women was equal, they also point out that female presence was more conspicuous in the permanence and perseverance of community management. While referring to neighborhood organizing, a female neighbor :“...there were men and women, but more often than not there were more women”.

Then, the referents of neighborhood organizing are in most part women, and when asked about the way in which neighbors integrated to neighborhood organizing and got acquainted with the Fundación el Riachuelo, Villa Jardín's inhabitants said that neighborhood women played an essential role in the construction of trust between both social actors and encouraged community participation.

Several reasons explain this. First, and as a general statement, poverty is a phenomenon that is more common among women than men<sup>8</sup>. The way poverty impacts on the organization of daily life is gender different, subjecting women to a bonus of frustration and social violence that men are able to avoid. But it, in their own words, it has also made them more resilient: “... men have to go to work... (and) women are more rugged fighters, they are ready to stir things up. They discuss more, have a lot of patience until they get what they need. Instead, men go three times, they get a no for an answer, and he gives up. A woman insists. (...)”.

Another element that has to be taken into account to understand the reasons for female participation in the project's organization and management, is born out of the fact that although water is necessary both for men and women, the way people perceive the effort implied in getting water, before the supply system had been effected, showed a conspicuous difference between men and women. While neighborhood women use more of their time to perform domestic tasks, take care of children (in the family and the school), carrying or buying water is much more a women's responsibility than men's. That is why it is important to highlight the changes in daily life brought about by the regularization of the drinking water services. According to one of the women: “ (Now) It is more comfortable and I organize things better. When I want to wash down, I do so. If I want, I may wash down the sidewalk, have plants. Before, I couldn't have plants because I had to bring the water from the neighbors who had a well... and now everything is easier. Besides, I need water more than anyone because I make cleaning products and... they are extracts and I need water to make them. Not a lot because I sell them only once a week at the neighbors' market, on Saturdays. It's a job. Besides, I can give drinking water to the children. I can make juice without having to boil water, just with drinking water. It is not like the other, you didn't know where it came from. Pipes were old, you couldn't give that water to the children because it was a risk. ...”.

Another one noted: “(For me) it was a dramatic change because, you can imagine, if you got up at two or three in the morning to get a drop of water and you couldn't get any, you spent three or four days at the pump and there was no water. And sometimes you had to save it, many times you couldn't even wash yourself. (...) Many times you had to wait in the truck (...).“(Once I had drinking water), I installed the automatic washing machine the children gave to me (...)” (Female Neighbor, Villa Jardín).

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<sup>8</sup> Indec statistics. May 2002.

Another woman who lives in the wall sector added: "Everything changed. Now the children don't have to carry water any more. I have faucets. Sometimes I have very little water, but... all the same we manage. We fill up the bottles in case it is cut down.

Question: Are you still afraid it may be cut down?

Answer: Yes (laughs). Even now I'm afraid. The water pressure is not too strong, but when it comes out I begin to prepare water. I didn't have any faucets before. I had them installed with the coming of the water, for the yard and here in the kitchen, which is where I most need them.

Having drinking water resulted in a change that involved several aspects of individual and social life. In the case of the kindergarten Santa Teresita, that has morning and afternoon shifts and 25 children distributed in 5 classrooms, teachers could see changes in children's activities, and in their hygiene, their mood, and the pedagogical performance: "But having water relaxed us a lot... Children love it and more so when it is warm. Because in winter, we had another problem and it was the water heater. When there was no water, it couldn't be used. And in winter, the water was cold. So now it is wonderful. We organized raffles, we were able to buy a new heater. And that's important. Children come and say, "the water comes out warm." So they go out and play. Obviously, one is more relaxed. You drink water from the faucet and you don't think you'll get sick. You know where it came from. We are more relaxed when it comes to hygiene, if children go out and drink water from the bathrooms faucets (although we don't give it to them. If we give them water, it's mineral water or from the direct inlet; we don't take any from the tanks as a preventive measure), or while they are in the yard, and they go to the bathroom and drink water, you don't worry so much. So it's completely different. And I remember a game that made us laugh a lot. The game consisted in playing whatever we wanted. And I remember they were installing the water pipes and there were some sticks. And so the kids pretended they were installing the water. And they had placed the sticks one on top of the other. And everything that was happening in the street, they experienced it here. Besides, we used to tell them, "Watch out, there's the water man". So, when the water came, our work performance changed too. Our mood changed. Imagine arriving at eight in the morning and the first thing you ask is whether there is water. Or if there isn't any, you have to call the headmistress to decide what to do. And she calls somebody in charge and you have to wait until the latter calls this one, who calls the other one, and that one finally arrives. And by then it was ten in the morning. The kids drink their milk and two minutes later they go to the bathroom. So you had to tell them to wait because there wasn't any water. And if there is no water, will there be classes in the afternoon? ... Now we can play the soap-bubbles game, play with water in the yard. Now we can. Or we can play games and get dirty. Things that children love to do. They handle different materials and then there are no problems with the water. And each one brings their stuff, their towel, their soap, and they wash themselves. And it is a special moment. They love it. They wash their soap-dishes and take away the soap. They spend hours (she says so in a conspiratorial and comical tone).

The provision of drinking water also modified the relationships among family members. According to H.: "... It solved many problems because my husband is a bit grumpy. And as he is at home and doesn't work (he's retired), he was the one in charge of filling the buckets, waiting for the water to come out, and he used to grumble about us wasting water. He filled the big bucket and the small bucket for me. You found yourself with a lot of buckets full of water that finally you couldn't use because in the end you didn't need it. To wash I had to save as much as possible. It solved me many problems. Now I don't have any problems. He can't complain, he turns on the faucet and water comes out (laughs), he fills the tank... Besides, you can see changes in other things and other families. In the evening, people wash out outside, the halls are all washed down, and the children have fun. People that don't have a yard take their sinks outside."

Moreover, improvements were made in the houses, and the conditions and quality of life:

"I had to install the pipes, for example, for the bathroom because I didn't have any, I had a bathroom, but there were no pipes. And afterwards, the shower, which we didn't have because the water didn't come up." (Female Neighbor, Villa Jardin).

As regards diseases, neighbors have not registered a dramatic change, although they evidently agree in that some do not occur with the same regularity. They have mentioned dengue, diarrhea, parasitosis, skin rashes, as the most frequent diseases that result from the lack of drinking water. However, they were not very specific,

and in most cases, the references to these diseases are established for situations or families different than theirs. This apparent “lack” of memory may be due to several things. One probably has to do with not trusting the interviewer on this particular topic, since she could be considered a kind of judge regarding the care or attention that mothers provide their children. We should bear in mind that many of the people interviewed are women and it is obvious that the social norm regarding gender roles (such as being a “good” mother) might be at the bottom of their preference for silence.

Second, in the case of institutions like the Centro Piloto, they could not give a comprehensive answer to this question either, due to the lack of scientifically formulated statistics about the number of sick people and the type of disease, statistics that would contemplate the period during which the project was initiated and managed.

However I am able to confirm that the securing of water liberated women from having to devote intensive time to procure it, it brought peace of mind as to their children’s health, and it allowed women to take more and better care of other tasks. This helps to explain in part, the reasons for the high percentage of female participation in the project’s management.

Another reason that helps us understand this process is closely related to age identity among the women. Those who got more involved in the project were women over 50. It may thus be inferred that, being free from the tasks of reproduction and childcare, they had more time to devote to activities that are not related to the domestic space. Many of the women had gained their social work experience in the neighborhood with their activism inside several Catholic Church organizations, such as The Chapels and the Sisters of the Holy Heart. Thus, the origin of their history is closely linked, at the beginning, with welfare social work related to the practice of Christian charity. Doña Ch. is a woman who lives in Villa Jardín approximately since 1948. She has been blind since an early age and she also began to work with the Church when she was very young. In her narration of her own history which is full of anecdotes, her life as a blind woman, as stepmother of her husband’s three children, and as a fervent Church activist are always intertwined: “ (...) I’m still there, in a Church institution, the Legion of Mary.

Question: What is the institution like?

Answer: You work, you go out to work in the houses, you go in pairs to do the work. (...) I was the founder of the Legion of Mary because the Father asked me to, another father that was there told him to come see me and we started doing things. (...) I have been in the Legion of Mary for fifteen years. (...) The Chapel was built because of me. This is the first Chapel, San Antonio’s. That’s why I say: a priest that was here committed me to build San Antonio’s Chapel. Because I invited the priest over to eat and I told him my idea. I said: “Father, I want to build a little room just for San Antonio. Can I do it?” Right here, in the yard I have at home, you know? He said: “No, Chona,” he told me. “You are going to put San Antonio outside for everybody else, you are not going to keep him just for yourself.” And he committed me to do so. I had to go and talk with one person, and then another person to build that Chapel, until we inaugurated it. And we already have eighteen Chapels, it all started here, with San Antonio.

Q: And it was only women who organized themselves for that?

A: No, I looked for men because I was not going to..., we women, we were not going to build the Chapels, work with...

Q: But where did the idea come from?

A: From the priest. The priest was in touch with us. We told him how it could be done, about the man I found. And that’s how we started building it. And then, two years later, this was in ’84, San Antonio’s. And then in ’87 or something, I guess, there was the Legion of Mary. And he sent me another priest that is no longer here. I tell him, Father Luis committed me to build San Antonio’s Chapel, Father José committed me to build the Legion of Mary (...)

Q: And what did you do in the Legion of Mary?

A: The Legion of Mary is a worldwide thing. We go out... There is a president, a vice-president, a secretary and a treasurer and the ones that have... The Legion of Mary are the four legs of the table. The four of them have to be there. And then there is the Curia. Now we have a curia here in Cristo Redentor, which we didn't have. (...) We meet once a week. But we go to every home to provide spiritual help. We do not provide material help. Because if there is somebody who needs something, we send Caritas in. Because we can't replace Caritas in what they do. Ours is a spiritual thing. Just that. But we advise or point in the right direction. There are people who need help so we point in the right direction, in relation to the priest, baptism, marriage, as regards all those things that people don't know, what time are the Church services, when baptisms are held, when... All those things. We go home by home and ask if there are children who have not been baptized. We give advice but not in a high-handed way.

Q: And do you find that neighbors sometimes ask things that have nothing to do with the Church?

A: Very little. Almost never. It's always related to this, spiritual help. Here in San Antonio they know me in all the homes because I've been there. I am from here, from this place, I think I have been here for fifty years. When we got here we lived in a house made of clay. Clay! Well plastered, it had a ceiling and you wouldn't know it was made of clay, you know. And that's how we started. Here there was a hole. You can't imagine how many trucks full of soil we brought from the coast with my mom, brothers, with everybody. Because when I settled here, then my mom came from Corrientes, with my brothers and sisters. I always helped my mother raise my brothers and sisters because my mother was always a mother and a father for us all. We are seven brothers and sisters and I am the second one. There are only two boys. They are all already in different places. Here it's me and a sister, that's it. And then there is my niece who is living here with me in the backyard, the one that takes care of me when I get sick. Today, my husband is not here. He went to the doctor because he had both eyes operated on and he went for a check-up.

Q: And besides your religious work, did you do any other kind of work in the neighborhood?

A: No. But really here in Villa Jardín they know me very well because of the Chapels. I always say that my big family is Christ the Redeemer, because it was due to the Chapels. We were always praying in the Chapels, I have always been in the Chapels. And everybody knows me from there.

Q: When people from the Fundación arrived in the neighborhood, did you contact them or did they contact you?

A: They contacted me.

Q: Why?

A: They contacted everybody. Not only myself. They invited everybody.

Q: And you went along with it. (Laughs)

A: Well, yes. As they told me to come to the meetings, to come and listen. And as that guy called Guillermo once told me, they invited the heads of the community. And I was the head of the community of San Antonio and so they invited me. And then there was another woman as head of the community and they didn't like her. So they told me to continue going, it didn't matter that there was another head of the community, but that I should continue attending the meetings. And sometimes I attend the meetings. Sometimes I don't because I am very busy. But sometimes I leave what I'm doing and go.

Q: But what does it mean to be head of the community?

A: That I am in charge of this community, of this block, of everything. Of everything: when it is San Antonio's feast, I go talk in the Church, tell them what's going on with people. So when there was somebody that needed something from Caritas, I had to prepare the paper and send it to Caritas. I had to issue the order to give...

Q: But who decides who is the head of the community?

A: They chose me. The priest chose me. All Chapels have a head of the community. (...)" (D. Ch., Female Neighbor, Villa Jardin)

There is a similar case with another woman, M., in the neighborhood: "(...) I spent fifteen years leading the community, I spent twelve years, almost thirteen, as a representative. I'm still there, but not as a representative any more, but as somebody whose voice is heard, maybe due to the years I've spent there, but nobody came to work like that and connect the water, nobody.

Question: So then, how did the contact with Aguas Argentinas begin? Did you organize yourselves or how did it begin?

Answer: Well, this began through the Fundación el Riachuelo. That is the most direct contact. First we gathered as representatives of the three communities... I wasn't very sure, I'm one of those who didn't want to believe this could be true, and well, here I am, pleased and happy. When the people from Riachuelo came (...) to tell me that we were going to work so that then we could have water, so that then we could be owners, it was all for the neighborhood's improvement. But those people, not these people but other people had already come, but not to see me, because I'm not old enough so as... (they came) to promise this kind of things, that we were going to be owners, that we were going to improve the neighborhood.

Q: Do you mean the state or the town hall or..?

A: I don't know if they belonged to the town hall. That's why I'm saying that I don't know where they came from, they were people coming to tell us that in the future we would be owners, that we would enjoy a better life, that we would own the places where we are and once again, it all ended up in nothing. So it was as if these, when the Fundación el Riachuelo came.... "I'll go as a representative, I'm going to listen, to see," and when more or less I see that things are going to come true, then I'm going to talk to the people as their representative, as I should, right? They belong to my community. This happened, I think, two years ago. Practically the whole neighborhood knew something, but as a representative, I didn't tell anything to anybody. So they came to ask me and I told them, I'm not yet convinced, and if I'm not convinced, I can't tell you that works are being carried out or will be carried out.

Q: So, what convinced you, then?

A: I was convinced (...) when we began to form the Neighborhood Units, not the Neighborhood units themselves, but the fact that we began talking with more people (...) I thought everything was more serious and I had to speak with my people. Because I thought it was already... it was already too much and I couldn't handle it alone, I had to speak about it because it was becoming a reality and so it was that little by little I became convinced (...) Then I went to the people, I spoke to them, I told them this is happening; if you want to learn more about it, go and ask, we still didn't have a place to meet, so we met at different homes. So, where am I going to send the people, where will I find them, so until this house was made, I said you can send the people to that place, to find out about something. If I was not convinced, how could I send the people to find out about something that I... That's why I always told people here at the Fundación el Riachuelo, I don't know for how long you will be here, but I intend to stay for a long time and I always try to keep my word, it was always like this in the community, that's why I'm still here, otherwise they would have kicked me out, I think, so then... when I stay a little longer, when I'm convinced, I will convince my people, and it is a community that didn't give much trouble to... they immediately made up their minds... I'm speaking about my community, the Community of Nuestra Señora de Itatí. (...) You have to educate people, even if they have not attended school. (...) I teach Catechism, so I've dealt with people for years; I've spent sixteen years working at the parish. So you have to educate and help people, and there are a lot of people being helped by the Church, by Caritas (...). Besides, we ask, in our prayers, we pray to feel all the needs of the rest, so that we can also help them, and not only say, yes, it hurts me and that's that, like the government does: "I'm very sorry for the people's suffering, but I do nothing." We put together all our sufferings and do something about it. We do

something to help them, and so you can help a lot, a lot, a lot, we have a lot of people helped by Caritas (...) we help people in need, there's always somebody who needs more than you."

This testimony again reveals women's weight in Villa Jardín's social networks. M.s' legitimacy in her community, which she has represented for 13 years, becomes evident. In this sense, M. is a woman who is recognized by her male and female neighbors and she is cognizant of that fact. Another factor that should be considered is how Mercedes acts politically. As a legitimate representative, she is the one that "screens" the Fundación and decides the criteria of trust and rapprochement. These criteria are based in her own experience as a poor woman, used to hearing promises that more than once have not been fulfilled by several institutions. Thus, she acts as a hinge between external institutions and the community itself (Delcroix: 1996). However, once she becomes convinced of the value and seriousness of the proposal, she stimulates participation. This is why she absolutely refuses to replace the neighbors in the tasks of looking for information or committing to the project. Therefore, her political practice acquires a clear feature of horizontality and democracy, even breaking with Argentina's traditional political and religious culture which is strongly verticalist.

Likewise, the association to the church is very important. The impact of (Christian) religious ideology in the creation of poor women's identity demands a more thorough analysis than the one presented here. However, I would like to suggest some considerations to delimit this complex interaction between women and the Church.

This institution is characterized, among other things, for having a predominantly male hierarchical organization, and it is deeply conservative regarding women's role in society. However, it builds the neighborhood's social networks by incorporating women to the task of spreading the religious doctrine. This generates an "exit door" for women from the domestic space and their husbands control in the use of time. This results in the acquisition of certain degree of autonomy and freedom to "win" the streets, relate to other men and women, and build a deep knowledge of their own community's social fabric. It is precisely this community knowledge and recognition that turns them the "filter" of any organization that intends to act inside Villa Jardín. Women thus assume a hinge position between institutions outside the community, and the community itself.

But also, this Christian social activism allows many women to andel the information on available community resources (whether material or "spiritual", as many interviewees have explained many times.) Following Temma Kaplan (1990), due to her social condition as a woman of the popular sectors, she plays a guaranteeing role in the collection and distribution of community resources, as a mechanism to preserve the life and survival of neighbors. This is obviously a key element to understand the reasons that made this women commit so seriously to the securing of drinking water supply, a basic resource for life sustenance—as we have already stated throughout this presentation.

Also, in many of these women's personal and collective history, their task as collectors and distributors frames the transcendence of their action from the domestic to the public space<sup>9</sup>. And it is precisely in this passage from the domestic to the public space where we may see the breaks and continuities of the traditional codes that society culturally assigns to feminine behavior. This is a very important factor and requires that we should take into account at least two aspects. First, that in general social welfare tasks that women perform in contemporary Western societies are perceived by the women and their social circle as an extension of a role they have been culturally assigned as mothers and wives in the family sphere. Thus, motherhood exercised in the domestic sphere as an almost unquestionable mandate, legitimates women's work in children's dining halls "outside" the home. The rest of the functions inherent to reproductive roles such as those referred to their children's education, family clothing, cleaning and cooking, persuades them to work on school-training support, in projects for teenager-support through training for young men and women, or the securing of clothes for children who are more vulnerable than their own children. However, these activities which are performed in

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<sup>9</sup> In Feminist historiography, the debate on the connection between domestic and public space has been long discussed, the same as the meaning and characterization of both spheres. We do not intend here to delve into this discussion but we believe that this theoretical distinction is useful for our research.

extremely difficult and disadvantageous conditions such as those generated by poverty<sup>10</sup>, results in women's action having a huge collective impetus to their community to guarantee the securing of rights and duties as citizens in a highly unfavorable environment, to be able to exercise those rights and duties. The following testimony is relevant as an example of this:

Question: When the process began, do you remember what the company said it would do?

Answer: Yes. The company guaranteed that the water would go, for example, six meters high, without the use of pumps or anything, that it would have a lot of power (...).

Q. I'm asking you about the time when the company was privatized and you thought about connecting the water.

A. The company said it would help, but not at the beginning, because I think the project of Villa Jardín was much later (sic) than when it actually was carried out. The company itself helped quite well. We had trouble with the Town Hall because it didn't want us to do that (...) Not at the beginning, but towards the end, when the Mayor had to sign, he refused. As he is the Mayor, he didn't want to. He backed off. And we were close to the elections. (...) Can you imagine how we felt? We couldn't believe it was happening. He was just about to sign. But no, he simply refused. And I tell you: half of Villa Jardín went to the Town Hall. We went and spoke with Luis' nephew. He saw us and we stated our problem. So he said, "come tomorrow and you will speak with my uncle. We'll see how we can sort this out." (...) Well, next day. But they had passed on to me some information. Somebody told me, "Don't go alone. Take everything you have, all the papers you have because tomorrow somebody from Aguas Argentina will come (to the town hall building), the congressman or councilman Días Pérez will come, two from the Town Hall, so you come prepared. Make them sign everything and that's it (...), make them sign everything." (...) I went and called H<sup>11</sup>. and told her, "this is what is happening. Somebody told me to do this." So she talked to E. (the president of the Fundacion) and told him, "R. says this and this, and she's well informed." So then H. came with all the papers, we went to the Town Hall and (...) Quindimil<sup>12</sup> (the Mayor) didn't see us, as I had been told he would. (...) Well, we went there and all the people I had said arrived. When H. saw the man from Aguas Argentinas, she almost dropped dead. Well, the guys came prepared to fight, they were not willing to sign. Somebody with less power than Quindimil's nephew saw us. And so that's how they dealt with us. The congressmen were there, and the councilmen, but not the Mayor. So, before us, with all the papers in order, there were a lot of buts, and we didn't come to an agreement, but they had to give in and give us a date to sign. They also told us, "we don't want any fanfare, or anything of the sort. The fewer people, the better." That day we were a few and the Mayor signed.

Question: Did you blackmail him with the elections?

Answer: Yes, of course. But they told his nephew that, not him (the mayor). But, well, his nephew informed him of this (...)" (R., Female Neighbor, Villa Jardín)

The event that this woman refers to, was one of the most important moments in the development of the project. In effect, after the different intervening actors agreed to carry out the project, there was still the fact that the Lanús municipal government had to sign the agreement that would allow to begin the works. Manuel Quindimil, Lanús Mayor, put obstacles to the process and this caused the men and women of Villa Jardín to mobilize to the City Hall, and discuss a strategy to force Quindimil to fulfill the agreement. During this mobilization, women played a key role, and it is interesting to see how R. and H. used this, and their lucid political understanding about the moment to come. In effect, using the upcoming elections as a pressure tool implied a vast knowledge and awareness of how politics work in Lanús, and of the use of their own abilities. This is even more important if we consider that among the Argentine middle-sectors, the common opinion is that poor

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<sup>10</sup> I refer to the social vulnerability to which human beings in poverty conditions are subject to, the increase of social and institutional violence against them, their children, their elders, and how they are generally devaluated by society, among other things.

<sup>11</sup> H and R are two female neighbors of Villa Jardín

<sup>12</sup> Manuel Quindimil, Peronist, has been Mayor of Lanús since 1983.

people may be easily co-opted by political parties during the election period to gain their support. In Lanús, exactly the opposite was true, and this reveals a well developed sense of political opportunity on behalf of the community actor, particularly the female actor.

In sum, this episode shows that women's specific actions outside the domestic sphere aids the empowerment process of the impoverished sectors in two ways. The first one refers to the strengthening of the community at large regarding its organizing and negotiating capacity. The second one refers to gender roles, because it makes women visible regarding their ability to carry out negotiations for the securing of vital resources for community survival. It also reinforces women and their spaces as indisputable interlocutors vis-à-vis (private or public) institutions that are external to the neighborhood.

However, this does not mean that the women of Villa Jardín have subverted their gender status, nor that they have a feminist consciousness that would lead them in this direction. But they have developed a deep female consciousness (Kaplan: op. cit; Molyneux: ....), expressed on the one hand, in their acceptance of the gender roles derived from the sexual division of labor and the subsequent responsibility socially assigned to women regarding the preservation of life. However, on the other hand, it implies the strong defense of the rights that these obligations create according to the women. This allows them to act with relative independence and autonomy of the traditional precepts that define their behavior as women; to put in effect their fighting capacity, with a dynamic effect on the rest of the community; and lastly to build social leadership based on principles alternative to those that rule the neighborhood's "historic" political and social organizations.

The second aspect we would like to emphasize and that allows to understand better those practices that women carry out when they fight for the community's resources, refers to the meaning of women's public action. In this analysis, the fact that this group of women is interacting and negotiating with social actors that wield a differentiated and greater power in terms of class and institutional power (the company Aguas Argentinas S.A., the Town Hall), which is also male in its representation and direction.

This leads us to rethink the concept of public action from the perspective of gender<sup>13</sup>, understanding by public sphere "both the discursive field of deliberation and collective action that seeks the alleged 'common good,' and the real spaces of action and deliberation, outside the limits of home and kinship, and within the framework of social institutions." According to Vassallo (2000), this conceptualization allows us to challenge the gender assumptions of classical political theory that inscribes political action in the male sphere and public action only as the one aimed at the State, a very useful perspective for our analysis. Not only because the State has disappeared as a safeguard in the provision of society's basic needs, but also because different actors have made their appearance (the Company, the Fundación, the neighborhood organizations themselves) and the community in general, and women in particular, have had to interact with them. All this resulted in a challenge for women to measure their strengths and resources in their own community environment and in the "spaces of deliberation" generated specifically by and for this project.

On the other hand, we must not forget that the "producer" of the resources women distribute o manage inside the community, is currently undergoing a serious disarticulation crisis. In fact, the traditional and global social provider, the State, has relinquished its functions regarding the subaltern popular sectors. Accordingly, the historical changes in the labor market, added to increasing unemployment has also mined men's role as hegemonic providers of resources for family and/or collective survival. Thus, the sphere of female action is broadened vis-à-vis their role as distributors, becoming themselves providers as well.

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<sup>13</sup> I follow the original conceptualization of Alejandra Vassallo in her analysis of the women of the Beneficent Society of Buenos Aires. See, Vassallo, Alejandra (2000): 'Entre el conflicto y la negociación. Los feminismos argentinos en los inicios del Consejo Nacional de Mujeres. 1900-1910'. In: Gil Lozano, Fernanda; Pita, Valeria & Ini, María Gabriela, eds.: *Historia de las Mujeres en Argentina*. Buenos Aires, Editorial Taurus, Tome II, pp.176-195.



## CONCLUSIONS

The women have played a key role in the project's management and implementation. Their protagonism cannot be denied in the development of internal social relations of the community and with the external actors. Women's presence was transcendental not only for the establishment of the trust and legitimacy networks between the community actor and the rest, but also to lend dynamism to the project's implementation and development. In fact, women's contribution to this research have been invaluable in terms of establishing contacts with potential informants, knowing and walking around Villa Jardín, and earning legitimacy to be able to talk with male and female neighbors.

On the other hand, we should highlight the process of transformation in the women of Villa Jardín, as the project of drinking water supply matured throughout the years. In the time between the beginning and the end of the project, there has been a pronounced difference in women's social and even political position regarding the exercise of their own management ability and their capacity to achieve female acknowledgment and leadership. Understanding this means taking into account that many of these women originally came from Christian social activism, stipulated and defined globally from a verticalist and masculinist leadership. Throughout this process, women began to gain autonomy from that original structure, becoming community referents for their own sake, both inside the neighborhood's social networks and vis-à-vis the rest of the actors.

Therefore, the actions of Villa Jardín's women contributed to change their perception as citizens and leaders, and rendered them visible not only as collectors and distributors, but also as providers of resources. Moreover, their use of leadership helped to strengthened the community in terms of organization, negotiating capacity, and the improvement of living conditions.

In this process of transformation in women's position, their own experience at the different stages of multi-actor negotiation and neighborhood organization, and the Fundación practice in itself, played important roles. In fact, although this NGO had not outlined at the beginning a distinct politics regarding specifically gender notions, its theoretical framework and its methodological approach of social acting at the grassroots level allowed it to acknowledge the qualitative assets of female participation, avoiding prejudice or gender discrimination. Also, the Fundación experienced a process of transformation throughout the project's implementation, during which it uncovered several problems or analytical frameworks that opened it to new inquiries. Among them, the construction of female leadership and the different ways in which women participate and get involved in social movements have become central issues.

However, from the perception and assessment of women themselves about their action and leadership abilities, there emerges an evaluation that escapes simplistic categorizations. In other words, in actual reality women's participation levels have been high, the institutional acknowledgement they have won from official agencies or the private actor is unquestionable, and their effective and concrete representativity throughout the whole process has been fundamental. However, women themselves consider it insufficient when they reflect on their participation at decision-making levels, that is, the stage of defining and rubricating on paper or institutionally, the agreements arrived at in the interaction with the rest of the actors. It is at those levels that men take on the direction of the process. Women perceive themselves as braver (not only vis-à-vis men but also compared to women of other classes or social class sectors), more committed and persistent in everyday management and in the rest of the activities. In spite of that, they feel that the final "stamp" to any agreement is defined by men. That is, that the final decision and the more relevant papers in the process management continue to fall mainly on the male population.

In this sense, H., a well-known neighborhood representative with a vast work experience in and for the community, stated that: "(...) It was 70% women who lead the process to obtain drinking water (...)"

Question: And why is that so?

Answer: Maybe it's because she is the one that is more involved. Maybe it is because she has more time. Men, because they work, they do not have the time to go to the Town Hall at 7 a.m. But, mind you, women who

work also make time for that. Maybe men are more resigned. They feel they are the ones that have greater responsibility. But the one who fights more is the woman.

Q: But then, why do you allow men to be in charge?

A: Out of respect. So that they do not feel diminished. So that we can live together in peace, let's say. Take my husband, for example. He is a male chauvinist. But he does nothing. I always say yes to everything, you are right, it's ok, but I know what's best and what isn't. Then I do what I have to do (...).

Q: Then it seems you subordinate yourself within your house, but outside of it you stand your ground. In fact, the people who represent the company, the government, are mainly men. So women negotiate on equal terms in the face of a different class power and, besides, they are men. But, at home?

A: We give in (laughs). (...) Now, women living in shantytown fight more than those from the middle class.

Q: Why?

A: Because as we are less prepared, we are not so educated, we forget a little about ethics, about good manners. So, we approach things with less respect, we approach things and move forward. Instead, good manners, education, stop you when you want to do things. It is not our intention to offend, but we try to do things the way we can, in any fashion (...).

Elucidating the explanations that allow us to understand this apparent contradiction or establish its real limits, is beyond the scope of this research and would demand carrying out a research that puts gender at the center of the analysis. However, we could at least state that even though the levels of female leadership are not proportional to their participation levels, women seem to experience the gap between both as much wider than it actually is.

In fact, and as the last testimony quoted, this female neighbor elaborated the hypothesis that in fact women bestow power on men out of respect, to maintain "peace at home". She also said that although women (of the popular sectors) are more belligerent "outside" (their homes) than middle-class women, they had more trouble translating to the domestic sphere the freedom or progress towards egalitarian conditions gained in the public sphere. Therefore, and following the experience of the women of Villa Jardín, there are differences between women as regards their action in the public and the private spheres due to class status. However, a preliminary conclusion could be that the power inequalities derived from gender status permeate class inequalities. This does not mean that gender inequalities acquire an absolute autonomy vis-à-vis class inequalities, or that in fact, the notion of class should not partially support an analysis of how the public and the private work and are defined for each social sector. But we believe that the difficulties to reverse power situations between men and women in the private sphere, or in other words, of translating what has been gained outside the home to family relationships, has exceeded class inequalities and may be found in women of different social backgrounds.

Notwithstanding, I should point out that this is not a univocal process, and thus class differences do not have a lesser role in the creation of public and private spaces, and in the ways in which men and women inhabit them. Moreover, we cannot neglect the fact that this creation is mediated by a national historical context. The impact of neoliberalism in Argentina has been devastating for the subaltern sectors, and mainly for women. However, and despite the unbridled repression that started this model –tenaciously confronted by the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo after the abduction, torture, and murder of 30,000 people–, it could not fully destroy people's solidarity ties, and their commitment to the living conditions of those "who are in worse conditions than us," as one of Villa Jardín's women explained.

This may be the reason why many of these women decided to replicate their experience in other neighborhoods, collaborating with other women so that the latter could also profit from the drinking water system. Currently, many of Villa Jardín's neighbors, together with Fundación el Riachuelo, are working closely with 188 families that live in a shantytown in Quilmes, located in the southern area of Greater Buenos Aires, so that they may have water to drink, bathe, and feed themselves. And they are accomplishing their goals. At the beginning of the year, after three years of negotiations, work, and persistence despite lack of resources, the

Women's Committee of Santísima Trinidad in Quilmes, supported by the women of Villa Jardín, got as well their drinking water network.

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