

WOMEN IN NEIGHBOURHOODS: FROM LOCAL ISSUES TO GENDER PROBLEMS*

María del Carmen Feijóo

Dans les documents relativement peu nombreux montrant la participation des femmes aux mouvements sociaux latino-américains, les théoriciens ne s'accordent pas sur la valeur de leurs activités pour assurer le progrès de la femmes vers l'égalité sociale. L'auteur livre sa propre expérience lorsqu'elle a cherché à voir comment, dans les faubourgs de Buenos-Aires, les femmes latino-américaines de la base s'étaient récemment engagées.

Theory: Literature on Latin American Women's Role in Political Struggle

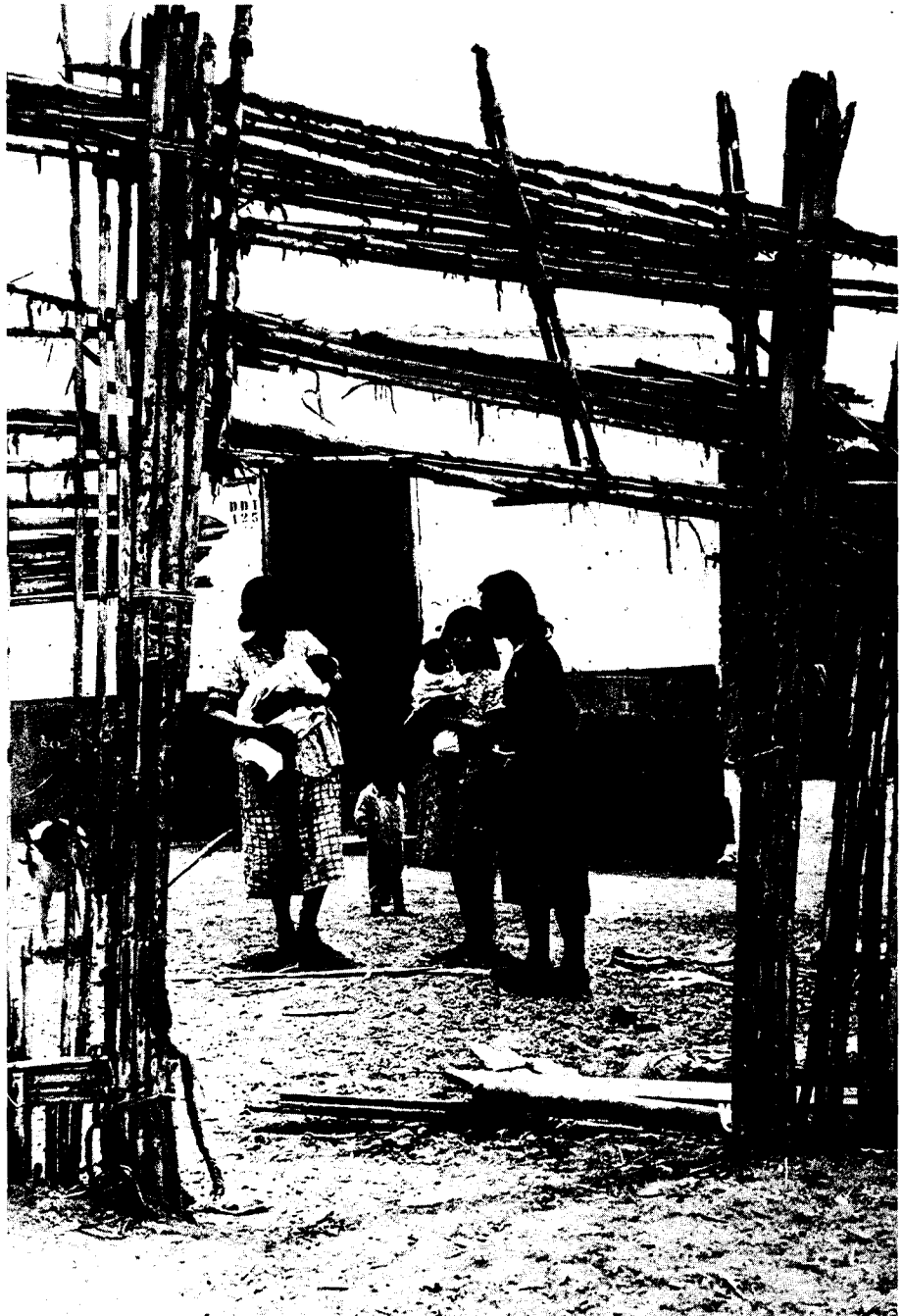
Information available on social movements in Latin America often emphasizes the role that women play in neighbourhood and urban struggles in different countries and cities of the region. However, literature specifically focusing on women in these types of movements is scarce. The little we do know is consistent with available historical studies, in which the prominent role of women in the struggle for better standards and their participation in the realm of reproduction in western societies are pointed out.

Within this scarce literature, there are a number of case studies (often testimonies) showing the participation of women in the popular movements. Undoubtedly, the most widespread is that of Bolivian leader Domitila Chungara de Barrios (Viezzier, 1977), but there are others, like Alejandra y Lucila Díaz Ronner's *Doña Jovita, una mujer en el movimiento urbano popular* (1983). Margaret Randall's book on women's experiences during the Nicaraguan revolution, *Todas estamos despiertas* (1982), is also relevant. Other studies deal with experiences emerging from some action projects with women in the popular sector, such as workshops on sexuality, self-consciousness, needle-work, handicrafts, support to families of missing persons and political prisoners, among many others.

Other papers analyze the meaning of this feminist participation in terms of its potential for social change or its effect in realizing changes in the subordination

patterns of women. The commonly-accepted view here is that the presence and action of women in popular movements is nothing but a reinforcement of their traditional household role, inasmuch as the struggle for social consumptions implies a direct extension of the domestic

role to the public sphere. If this is so, the struggles of women in the realm of daily and generational reproduction (i.e. for food, housing, health, and education) would reinforce the responsibility of women in their households and further contribute to gender subordination.



World Health Organization; provided by Frieda Forman, Women's Resource Centre, OISE

Some of these studies, such as Domitila's testimony, try to show the potential of this type of experience to generate a process of conscious-raising, including issues such as female subordination, capitalistic domination and class struggle in the region. From this perspective these movements are considered to be progressive, although the relevance of feminist struggles in the region is not taken into account. Elizabeth Jelin has pointed out that, while this sort of participation in the reproductive sphere may lead to a reinforcement of women's traditional roles, this is not necessarily the case.¹ Alejandra Massolo emphasizes that the entry of women into public life may be a real progress even if they cannot reach the goals they were seeking.² There is also widespread agreement that the strong feminist presence in urban and local struggles does not guarantee the setting up of gender issues.

Even if there is no agreement in the available literature concerning the meaning of these actions, there is a consensus on the ways in which women participate in grassroot movements. Women's participation is more short-term and it takes place in "inorganic" movements rather than in organizational frameworks which are more stable and institutionalized. Eventually the entrance of women into these movements takes place in the more crucial periods of the struggle, when confrontations are more intense and the greater combativity of women is needed. In these cases, when they fight for the defense of their land or their housing and even challenge the police or the army, the picture of women with their children in the front lines has been often depicted in newspaper reports and in the literature.

The feminist presence in these street struggles makes public opinion more sensitive to the legitimacy of the demands raised. However, once the immediate crisis is over women are not able to maintain a similar level of participation in the local power structure. The majority of participants go back to their houses as if nothing had happened. It is very unusual to find them holding executive positions in grassroots organizations. Where they are present, it is always in committees such as finance, education, health and welfare where they seem to be ghettoized in areas considered appropriate to women.

Some of the recent theoretical developments in Latin America relevant to our discussion focus on the subject of "new styles of making politics by women."³

Ruth Cardoso and Julieta Kirkwood support the view that social practices rooted in women's domestic roles show a great potential both for disrupting the social order and for perpetuating elements of the dominant ideology. This approach questions the assumption that demands for faucets, hospitals and classrooms only reinforce women's subordination – and that they imply a disregard for efforts which take place in public spaces, either in connection with the State or capitalist entrepreneurs. To maintain that demands for collective consumptions are just household issues ignores the scope of the collective organization of consumption and the role of the State in its administration.

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The illicit extension of a "conservative" interpretation undermines our awareness of the impact of women's participation in public affairs and hinders any accurate analysis of the social movements themselves. An appropriate example is the role played by the saucepan protest of right-wing housewives in the ousting of President Allende, and the role of same type of protest directed against Pinochet in Chile.

In other countries, such as Argentina, the *ollas populares* (popular organization to provide food to poor people) highlights the existence of hunger and the conspicuous presence of women in these organizations. Sometimes *ollas populares* support worker's conflicts (such as strikes in factories) and enhance the close relationship that can be observed in practice between struggles in the reproductive and productive spheres. These movements have ambiguous meanings: the real sense of each "political gesture" must be carefully analyzed in its own historical moment.

What does this new style of women's political participation mean? Is it a new type of demand or rather a new style of politics with old issues? Is there anything in common between nurseries organized by charity ladies and paterna-

listically directed to the poorer women, and the Brazilian movement pro-creche, organized within grassroots neighbourhoods, even if in both cases the same basic needs are fulfilled? Both the *objectives* of these social movements – whether in the reproductive or productive sphere – and the *form or style* in which political action is articulated are relevant to our assessment.

The new styles offer new possibilities of incorporating local problems into the larger political context; of perceiving in a set of local problems those inherent to gender subordination; and of perceiving the local dimension of problems stemming from gender identity.

On the other hand, the new political involvement of women represents an important attempt to revise traditional notions of the relationship between the public and private spheres, productive and reproductive realms.

Neighbourhood struggles – even while linked to the sphere of reproduction – combine elements of public and private domains. The ability of women to enter struggles in the public world involves an initial struggle in their private realm. Their external participation depends upon their success in redefining household responsibilities.

Practice: The neighbourhood experience

Our goal when we arrived in the neighbourhood of Greater Buenos Aires to conduct our action-research project was to explore the problems faced by women in a community. Here the development of community organizations was already well advanced. A neighbours' organization (*sociedad de fomento*), in operation for eighteen years, previously had encouraged men's participation. Its activity was geared to solving a land problem involving the neighbours and their families, all low-income workers. At that time women in the group were mobilizing around the construction of a Catholic chapel. A sexual division of participation, consistent with current stereotypes, was in play. While women's struggle was centered in the traditional reproductive sphere, men's participation was linked to more "modern" activities.

The formal structure of the neighbourhood association had not accommodated the possibility of creating a different realm for female participation. However, we could acknowledge the presence of

women, especially if they were household heads, in all these activities, thus confirming the centrality of women's roles in problems related to housing. Nevertheless, this female participation in the domestic sphere didn't lead them to hold executive functions within the association.

In the religious domain women were especially concerned with duties such as maintaining the priests' vestments and church facilities, the registration of births and weddings. At the time of our arrival in the neighbourhood, a grassroots ecclesiastical community (*comunidad eclesial de base*) was being organized according to the Puebla pastoral. This new democratic structure attracted women and men equally.

An exception to the rule of stereotypic female roles were the women community leaders. The behaviour of these leaders was not traditionally "feminine." Among them, a woman of great energy and organizational skills had delegated her household responsibilities to her teenage daughters and her unemployed husband. While working sporadically in the informal sector, she had the whole day at her disposal for community activity. When such women leaders get highly involved in community work conventional sexual barriers tend to disappear. Similarly with the implementation of works projects, there was no sexual division of labour: all women, leaders or not, build their own houses, pile up bricks, dig ditches, plaster walls and paint them whenever necessary. The ability of women to do "men's work" was matched by the men who, in their *sociedad de fomento*, were performing all the required tasks, including housework.

When they decided to encourage the creation of a kindergarten in a building erected with funds from the project, women were rapidly integrated into the participative research. They were at the same time clients and ensured the everyday running of the kindergarten, undertaking maintenance tasks and control of facilities, and also functioning as auxiliary personnel for the care of children. This initial involvement in education was extended quickly to other activities such as the organization of a local welfare system, at a time when a serious storm affected the whole neighbourhood. At the level of everyday interaction, they frequently approached the people in charge of the community center, in order to discuss with them personal difficulties, such as

family problems or difficulties they faced in their contact with governmental bureaucracy.

In the grassroots community (*comunidad eclesial de base*) and in the religious realm, the behaviour of women was quite different. Although this was an area where female involvement had been greater from the very beginning, later men were also involved in the activities, encouraged mainly by the priest. Men showed a tendency to dominate the representative structure of the community. Women did not easily surrender their places and even in this "traditional" area were capable of generating novel activities, very visible to the public eye. One could see them walking down the streets with a megaphone to announce religious activities, or working in the streets; soon they decided to "urbanize" (as they called it) an area close to a new chapel they themselves had erected in a marginal location within the same neighbourhood. Although women did not openly challenge the sexual division of labour in the community, they were accumulating unique experiences.

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Undoubtedly the most interesting experience involved an activity developed in a project geared to the popular education of adult populations called "People and Stories" (*Gente y Cuentos*). This project very rapidly attracted the attention of neighbourhood women. It had been presented as a consciousness-raising project. They were told that none of the participants had any monopoly on knowledge, nor had the process anything to do with traditional teacher-student roles. The objective was to open new paths of discussion: no specific goal was posed in questions relating to women's subordination. Suddenly we were all amazed with the results.

The project encouraged participants to take part in a mixed weekly meeting,

at night. The first effect of this proposal on the participants' everyday life routines – especially women – was to modify the organization of housework so that all participants could attend the dinner-time meetings. It permitted women to establish horizontal relationships with other men of the community – without the mediation of their husbands. It allowed them to establish communication with a young man and a woman from outside of the neighbourhood, who were in charge of coordination.

Discussions, which were held once a week, led women to start thinking about the community actions undertaken by men in the *sociedad de fomento*, and also to discover and evaluate neighbourhood issues. The process also generated a desire to initiate a literacy campaign among the younger and older illiterates of the neighbourhood. One of the participants took over the whole responsibility in this area, an activity that involved her weekly exit from the neighbourhood in order to attend a methodology-training program offered in another neighbourhood.

The night some husbands came with their wives to find out what was going on in *Gente y Cuentos*' meetings, we saw the first effects of the women's participation on their own homes and mates. After this inspection, some women started to report that "family difficulties" were an obstacle to their continued attendance at our meetings! One middle-aged woman confessed that her participation in an extra-domestic nightly activity had provoked the hostility of her husband, who strongly disapproved of her absence during dinner time. She preferred an uncomplaining acceptance to facing her husband's anger, though her daughters' way of life showed her that alternatives are possible for women. Another woman, ten years younger, who had the same type of problems at home, decided to face a quarrel with her husband openly. She solved the baby-sitting problem by taking her children to the meetings and expressed her determination to preserve her newly-gained autonomy.

The attitude of female leaders towards these issues was highly ambiguous. Some suggested that the husbands' objections served as an excuse for women who were afraid to seek their own autonomy. Placed in a pioneering position in the context of community struggles, these women leaders found it difficult to understand the domestic and marital problems of "more backward" women.

The tentative conclusions of our research project on the problems of women in the community provoke some important questions. Is it likely that the participation of women in community activities and struggles will terminate in a return home and thus preclude their personal growth? Will their community experience allow them consciousness-raising about gender issues?

It is worthwhile to point out the need to systematically analyze the participation of women in neighbourhood movements from a *feminist* perspective. Women should not only be made target groups for policies, but the ways in which they present their problems and the ways in which social movements try to exclude those issues related to woman's oppression must be analyzed in connection with female subordination patterns. An awareness of gender issues is crucial to developing an awareness of this double oppression of women.

Our study showed how the firmly-set network of male chauvinism (*Machismo*) is "answered back" by women in the daily

routine. Our project, although not intentionally directed towards raising consciousness about women's subordination, did create an environment which stimulated the emergence of contradictions and ideas that must have been in the heads and feelings of the neighbourhood's women for a long time.

Women exposed to the contradictory messages of the mass-communication media, objecting within their homes to the sometimes despotic authority of their husbands, suffering the difficulties of coping with everyday life, punished by the death of their sons in the war over Malvinas or under their dictatorial government's political persecutions – all this in the context of an emerging democracy with new political perspectives – are questioning male domination in the household and political spheres.

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stamped, self-addressed envelope along with their request.

¹"Las mujeres y la participación popular: ideas para la investigación y debate," in UNRISD, *Diálogos sobre la participación* 2 (1982).

²*Las mujeres en los movimientos sociales urbanos de la ciudad de México* (México: Archivo Histórico de la ciudad de México – UAM Iztapalapa, 1983). Mimeo.

³See Cardoso, "A adesao dos homens ao feminismo: uma estratégia de sobrevivência," and Kirkwood, "El feminismo como negación del autoritarismo." Papers presented to the Seminar "Mujer y Política en América Latina: Viejos y Nuevos Estilos". (Buenos Aires: CLACSO, 1983).

*This paper was presented to the Second International Interdisciplinary Congress on Women held in Groningen, the Netherlands, on 17-21 April 1984.

María del Carmen Feijóo, a sociologist, is at the Centro de Estudios de Estado y Sociedad in Buenos Aires. She directed the action-research project in the Greater Buenos Aires neighbourhood described in this article.

SANCTIFICATION OR THE DEATH OF THE OLD WOMAN

We didn't seem like pilgrims
as we travelled our distances;
we were disguised in other modes
but reached the place just the same
though it was not as we had expected.

I marvel now that we have survived at all
or that we were granted even a glimpse of such resplendence.
But to face it together unafraid
that was the miracle.

This is a juncture that has always been here.
We have been journeying these years
perhaps in a circle,
rounding the spot night and day
without even knowing.

And to think it was reached finally in a moment –
your faithful lead urging me on
til my old woman died her natural death
under your pastor's heart.

Margo Swiss
Toronto, Ontario