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### **Popular Libraries: a space with "a Social Mission"**

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#### **ABSTRACT**

*During the labor and economic crisis in Argentina since 1990s, the woman has become a qualified member in non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and has had a special priority in popular libraries. The social role of these libraries is to function as organizations for women's discussion and to provide women with necessary tools for achieving access to "profitable work" by means of free courses and short academic training. This is done in agreement with other NGOs in order to facilitate the opening of a range of new doors in local economies.*

#### **"FEMININE" GENDER**

The "feminine" gender presents an important variable in the political and ideological concept and in the forms of women's everyday life. Masculine (gender) silenced during centuries feminine thinking and activity. When confronted by a changing macrostructure, it was forced to take steps toward the feminine factor in material and economic production. From the very beginning, woman was discriminated against by man as she was considered subordinate to the man, and, as a consequence, was placed in the private, family setting, while for the man was reserved the public setting that was related with production.

Women's studies have contributed to the group of studies in two ways. Firstly, they have helped to show the diversity and pluralism of societies as well in the past as at present. Secondly, and this is even more important, the women's studies have kept their goals linked with gender without separation. Thus, when a father sees his child for the first time, he sees among other things whether the child is a boy or a girl.

How could we understand (social) groups without understanding gender? For example, it's undoubtedly important that almost all military ranks are formed by biologically masculine persons and that they represent society's masculine values. In the United States, the entering of biological females in the military academies and police force was a huge and very polemic step.

How could we understand systems and plans of different societies without understanding the powerful system of gender? It's true that gender functions differently in different societies, but it works universally, both in our newest songs and most antique myths. Being a woman forms a reference with gender relationships in which the woman has lived, is living and will live.... Gender is an analytical category for studying relationships among men and women that allows for understanding of those structural factors which influence the female subordination and discrimination.

As such, gender is defined as a social structure on the basis of which each society understands the feminine and the masculine gender and which refers to the non-biological aspects of sex. During the last decades great effort has been made in changing social, cultural and economic barriers that prevent women from access to development; a massive, interruptive breakthrough to labor market, access to secondary and tertiary education, feminist movements, etc., these are some of the achievements. Joan Scott put it this way: "Creation of women's history as an academic discipline implies an evolution from feminism to women, to gender, it is, from politics to specialized history, to analysis."

## **DEMOCRACY AND UNEMPLOYMENT**

During the twenty years of democracy (1993-2003), many positive things have happened in Argentina as a product of this democracy, such as: election of representatives, reelection or not of these representatives, active participation of citizens in the governmental institutions, freedom of expression, public debate, dissemination of information without restrictions, etc. Also, there has been negative events, especially those caused by incompetent governors who organized bad, ineffective administrations, corruption embedded in political sphere, lack of credibility, low salaries, social inequality, etc.

Some authors argue that the primary obstacle to free implementation of citizenship has its roots in social inequality. Real democracy is not implemented only on a formal level -- but at a substantial level, it is, it must secure social and economic

equality as a starting point of authentic political equality. The bad economic administrations have caused a high percentage of unemployment that affects men as well as women of ages from 40 to 60, who are left outside of the productive labor system.

This situation occurring in 64 per cent of households in Argentina has had such an impact that in majority of cases "the woman" has confronted these problems with greater decisiveness. Women are those who, because of necessity and crisis, managed to reenter to labor market more easily while looking for creative ideas to bring forward their families and to become "economic backbones" of their households. They were called "bosses of household."

The authors who have written on this subject unanimously defined "bosses of household" as those who place emphasis on their economic role as well as on their social and family functions. From this point of view it's possible to say that the term "boss of household" coincides with every woman who takes on the responsibility of her family group's economic maintenance as well as decision making involved. The same definition, thus, explains that there are women who work alone as heads of household, it is, without a partner; among other things, they work as heads of households part-time and only for economic purposes.

Once a woman has taken on the role of the head of household, she tries to lean on those resources that are available, first within her own home, then outside of it. The first tactic is to look for a job. (That's a real problem in current times!) Although the woman's entering in the labor market continues and increases, the type of employment is not always the best remunerated. As an answer to this social request appear intermediary associations in-between the state and the citizens. The role of community organizations is becoming more and more important in the area of social development. While the state and the commercial sector (that produces goods and services) don't answer people's necessities and needs, independent initiatives are born that have as their purpose to resolve these problems or to make better what is being modified. All the time this type of organizations are more and more important in complementing inefficient services, in eliminating social problems and in helping vulnerable groups. Organizations have power in terms of participation of their members (participation meaning: taking part in an activity, a group, etc.).

## **POPULAR LIBRARIES AND SOCIAL MISSION**

Libraries were born as autonomous civil institutions, proposed by Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, and they have a long history. They were built by inhabitants of each community. They function today as multicultural institutions and present a part of solution to many problems related with illiteracy, unemployment, education, and so on. In the words of Miguel Avila, president of the National Committee for Protection of Libraries, "--- besides offering books and bibliographic services, [libraries] must influence their communities through tasks of cultural and social extension... I'm

convinced that popular libraries have been, since their beginning, advancing this new conscience we see opening up every door, and that has presently transformed itself in the circles of social thinking. In this sense are built, for the first time, activities beyond the traditional library and cultural services. These activities are workshops with different aims and among them are important those that focus on vocational education and show in this way to young generations and unemployed persons tools for work.”

Libraries are meeting places for solving neighborhoods’ problems and for modernization and betterment of our people’s quality of life. They contribute to the reduction of cultural, educational and social inequalities. In these libraries become possible the values of solidarity, reciprocity and promise; they turn around individualistic concepts often rampant in our society.

### **ANALYSIS OF A CASE**

Before the creation of the school, la Escuela de Enseñanza Media No 10, in 1988, one of the main objectives of its director Marta Ramírez was the creation of a library that was open for the school’s community. Starting from her role as a woman, she was devoted to education and was convinced that the major tool for raising the intellectual, moral, social and economic level of the country was public education. Her priority was knowledge without distinguishing social classes and she considered the public library as cultural center of any institution and community, given the socio-economic and geographic conditions of the neighborhood: its location far from the city center (8 km) and lack of similar services justified this project.

A planning committee was formed, mostly of women who volunteered by serving, cooperating and working as a team and took care of administrative tasks. In 1997 it received its title as the Popular Library of the school, Act 9313, art. 5 of the Provincial Directorate of the Province of Buenos Aires; and Act 23.351 of the National Committee for the Protection of the Popular Libraries at the national level. It communicated with other non-governmental institutions, like the Labor Cooperative Limited of our city, the organizing body that is responsible for courses, teachers and costs. Those organizations that are interested in the project, apply for a library and offer a physical facility, registration and opening hours. Each year workshops are organized, free of charge, for women on different topics: weaving, recycling of paper, framing of pictures, gardening, studying English or Italian, folkdancing, painting techniques and introduction to singing.

Women’s response is always of importance because since participation gives them ability to make use in the future of the knowledge they’ve acquired. The objectives of the library are that participants achieve: independent work, increasing creativity, have access to updated library, develop working projects and creative entrepreneurships, and get orientation for searching information in networks.

The complexity of the current world and the accumulation of information are so great that it's impossible to update information on different topics all the time. Therefore, it's necessary to know where to search and find information. It's in this area where the librarian fulfills her intermediary role between information and the user.

All these activities have been beneficial both for the library and the community and have increased women's participation and produced, as a direct consequence, an increase in the number of members. They have turned the library into a community institution by adding to the traditional cultural-educational space another space with "a social mission." They are challenging multiple political, economical, vocational and social everyday problems that our country has been facing during many decades.

## **CONCLUSION**

There were 80 women who participated in the project during a period from April to November 2002. According to the results from various workshops, we believe that there were given tools for each one of them to become creative, critical and participative persons who are able to make decisions and be more liberated. We are convinced that knowledge opens opportunities and gives adequate answers even to difficult problems. At the same time, we must evaluate the process of activities on a continuing basis in order to ensure growing and to strengthen those parts that work well as well as to readjust negative factors.

Today more than ever before popular libraries in all communities must function as real multifunctional spaces, They must, in addition, be kept up to date with information technologies. They must be socially occupied in a globalized and competitive world. The popular libraries perform their tasks in teams, aggregating in cooperation and unity as an institution of public good that works for others. They aim to achieve interaction between the local, by looking inside (library-community-neighborhood), and the global; by looking outside (city-country-world) and to create life, to enrich it personally and in groups for the common good of the whole population.

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