

Empowering Poor Women: The Unexpected Effects of a Welfare Program in Argentina

by Mariela Szwarcberg

Professor Mariela Szwarcberg is a postdoctoral lecturer at the University of Chicago's Center for Latin American Studies. She conducts research in several areas related to the consolidation of democracy in Latin America. Prior to her current lectureship, she served as a fellow at the University of Notre Dame's Kellogg Institute for International Studies and at Yale University's Program on Democracy and has served as a consultant to the National Institute for Public Administration in Argentina. Szwarcberg earned her Ph.D. in political science at the University of Chicago in 2009.

ABSTRACT:

This article presents an analysis of a poverty alleviation program implemented in Argentina called *Plan Vida*. Created and launched by the incumbent party, the program ultimately failed to deliver the desired electoral results and has only achieved a moderate improvement in public health indicators. However, the plan has enhanced the ability of

participants to negotiate their role and status within their communities. By using a comprehensive approach to evaluate the effects of this program, several indirect benefits to women and society are shown. Overall, this article illustrates the importance of using a comprehensive approach to evaluate the effects of social policy.

TEXT:

Created with the dual purpose of boosting the Argentinean incumbent Peronist party's vote share in upcoming elections and lowering malnutrition and infant mortality indicators, *Plan Vida*, a welfare program targeted to infants and pregnant and nursing mothers, failed in delivering the expected votes and has only achieved a moderate effect on public health indicators. Yet the program has succeeded in empowering millions of women who have been involved in delivering and receiving daily food as part of the program. Even as these women continue to carry out the household tasks that constitute the core of their lives, such as raising children, cleaning houses, and cooking, their testimonies highlight how much their lives have changed since they were enrolled in the program.

Plan Vida was created in 1994 and initially implemented in the province of Buenos Aires. Over time, the plan's coverage was extended to several other provinces. While at present the program does still exist in several provinces, it does so under different names with substantive modifications in implementation and significantly reduced coverage.

The plan's creator and director was the wife of the governor of the province of Buenos Aires, Hilda "Chiche" Duhalde, part of the Peronist party. When she decided to run for national deputy in 1997, she gave Plan Vida an extraordinary

amount of national visibility. The 1997 races, including that of Chiche Duhalde, tested the incumbent Peronist party's power. As the largest electoral district and a stronghold of the Peronist party, the province of Buenos Aires therefore became a battleground for elections held that year. The combination of poverty and voter concentration in Greater Buenos Aires made winning this district key to guarantee an electoral victory. The concentration and visibility of the female *manzanas* involved in the Plan Vida program in Greater Buenos Aires inevitably put these women at the center of the political campaign.

There were daily discussions in newspapers, on the radio, on television, in coffee shops, and in political associations about the electoral effect Duhalde's "army of *manzanas*" would have.¹ At the time of the election there were 27,355 women distributing Plan Vida's goods to 838,615 beneficiaries in 1,704 neighborhoods in Greater Buenos Aires, according to figures reported in *La Nación* in November 1997. Public opinion associated Plan Vida with traditional forms of "political clientelism," where the votes of the poor are bought with minor consumption goods, in this case with food. Candidates were not absent to these discussions and voiced their opinions about the *manzanas* during and even after the political campaign. Running in opposition to the incumbent wife of the governor was Graciela Fernández Meijide, a charismatic politician with almost no political experience but with a personal history of struggle as a mother of a disappeared son. Fernández Meijide was quick to realize that she did not have to oppose *manzanas*; quite the contrary, she had to win their support. Thus, while she publicly denounced the "potential for clientelism"

of the program, she promised to support it. While campaigning she asked voters "to take with one hand [the goods they received from the program] and vote with the other." Chiche Duhalde insisted in the "apolitical character" of the program: "The *manzanas* are not involved in politics," and "I am not seeking to buy votes by using a program that delivers daily goods to pregnant women and children."

The combination of voters who saw the election as an opportunity to voice their discontent with the current administration (retrospective voting) and those who supported the best candidate (prospective voting) explains the Peronist party's electoral defeat in its stronghold that year. More surprisingly was the Peronist party's inability to win the support of poor voters that constituted its historical constituency.

In evaluating Plan Vida based on its efficacy in delivering the dual goals of expected votes for the incumbent party and a decrease in infant mortality indicators, policy makers, journalists, and academics have failed to observe and appreciate the profound impact the plan has had on the women involved in it. In this article I show how Plan Vida has enhanced women's capacity to negotiate their role and status within the household and expanded the range of potential choices available to them within their communities.²

By focusing on the unexpected effects of this welfare program in Argentina, this study makes two contributions. First, it highlights the importance of evaluating welfare programs in a comprehensive manner that enables policy makers to detect these significant changes. In this regard, the article shows that policy

makers need to go beyond simple quantitative metrics to fully comprehend the implications of policy. Second, the study challenges the conventional scholarly assumption that welfare programs targeted to women necessarily reinforce existing power inequalities by reproducing traditional gender roles.

In paying close attention to the life stories of the women involved in the program, I show how in addition to strengthening their role as mothers of the poor, Plan Vida has enabled these women to think critically about familial relationships, womanhood, and the problems of their community. Furthermore, I demonstrate how the changes they have experienced since being involved in the program have led many of these women to challenge existing arrangements in their domestic partnerships and to demand local services for their communities. Overall, the results presented here suggest that the emergence of new services in communities targeted by social programs can be an indicator of empowerment.

BACKGROUND AND METHODS

The aim of Plan Vida is to target infants and pregnant and nursing mothers by providing them with milk and cereal daily, eggs weekly, and sugar monthly. Plan Vida's beneficiaries receive the goods from the hands of *manzaneras*, female activists who distribute food among the beneficiaries on their blocks daily. In exchange for participating in the program, *manzaneras* obtain the same benefits as those enrolled in the program whether or not they are pregnant, nursing, or have infants.

I use ethnographic data that I collected in a representative working-class neighborhood in the province of Buenos Aires, Sargento Barrufaldi, to demonstrate how

the institutions and services we observed in that community were the direct outcome of women's involvement in the Plan Vida program. Most residents of Sargento Barrufaldi live in precarious and overcrowded homes that do not have indoor plumbing. They lack employment and health insurance, and their children suffer from malnutrition and treatable diseases. The extent of the effects unemployment have had on the community is devastating. Among the 5,000 people that live in Sargento Barrufaldi, 70 percent are children and teenagers, and 8.4 percent are senior citizens. According to SIEMPRO, women have on average five children, more than half of the population has not finished high school, and a significant number of household heads, particularly women, have not finished primary school. Based on these indicators, municipal authorities chose individual residents of Sargento Barrufaldi to receive the goods of Plan Vida. It should be noted that considering the situation for most residents in Sargento Barrufaldi, among the families of most beneficiaries, Plan Vida not only contributes to feeding children but also to feeding entire families.

The ethnographic data includes a field diary, direct observations, and participation in delivering goods for the program during four months of fieldwork in 2000, transcripts of recorded in-depth interviews with *manzaneras* and beneficiaries that lasted on average three hours each, and archival research in municipal, provincial, and national newspapers.³ I conducted follow-up fieldwork in 2002 and 2005 to trace changes in the community. By combining data gathered from forty life stories, participant observations of the distribution of the welfare program, and interactions among women

who deliver and receive the program's goods, I show how women's involvement in the program has made them question how they understand and interpret their own history and encouraged them to organize collectively to improve the living conditions in their community.

I measure women's empowerment by studying the observable effects of Plan Vida in the Sargento Barrufaldi community. In Sargento Barrufaldi, Plan Vida stimulated the manzaneras and the beneficiaries to organize themselves and to successfully demand both the implementation of a program that enables adults to finish school and the construction of a health center (*salita*) in the community. Both projects responded to the shared needs of the manzaneras and the beneficiaries and are the product of their collective organization in petitioning local authorities.

This study builds on a tradition of oral history and interpretation to study poor women's empowerment. As in the seminal historical works of the life of Rigoberta Menchú (Burgos-Debray 1984) and Doña María (James 2000), I used the transcripts of the life stories of manzaneras as texts subject to interpretation. I draw on the narratives of manzaneras, beneficiaries, and residents of Sargento Barrufaldi to build an argument about the unexpected effects Plan Vida has had for the individuals involved in the plan in particular and for the community in general.

PLAN VIDA'S UNEXPECTED EFFECTS: EMPOWERING POOR WOMEN

"Becoming a manzanera was to begin a new life," Dora told me while sharing a mate on her patio. I spoke with her on one of my trips to the community. When I asked her why a new life, she explained to me that her personal and social world

became bigger after joining the plan. Before the program, Dora's world was her home and family; she had little contact with anyone else in the *villa*. Her family lived in another province, and her husband left early in the morning to come home late at night *molido* (burned out) after working in construction for ten hours and commuting another two. In describing the changes she experienced since becoming a manzanera, Dora compared her life before the program as living inside a prison cell. Plan Vida enabled her to get in touch with people and attend workshops where she got motivated to finish the studies she quit when she got pregnant. Other manzaneras also constantly mentioned the prospect of getting out and knowing other people as virtues of the program. As one manzanera, Miriam, said:

Look, I love it because I get to talk to people. Before, in the morning I got up, cleaned the house, and sat down to have mate. Now, while I have my mate I talk to them [beneficiaries who come to pick up food at her house]; they tell me about themselves. You know, it's a nice job.

The sheer fact that many women are seen to value the possibility that the program has given them simply to talk with their neighbors illustrates the isolation of women living in overcrowded urban areas. Even though they live next to one another, the everyday chores of cleaning, cooking, buying groceries, and raising children take over, leaving little time to talk and get to know one another. In this context, Plan Vida has connected women, and it is in those interactions that manzaneras and beneficiaries have become aware of inherited models of family and womanhood.

The process through which manzaneras ended up questioning their existing situation, and specifically their husbands' machismo, began through the realization of how much they shared with others. To think critically about their reality and circumstances, women needed to question the world of their mothers and grandmothers, which was all they knew, expected, and even looked for. It was at the workshops run as part of Plan Vida where women in the community began to develop these thoughts that ultimately empowered them to pursue and even achieve individual goals.

Manzaneras were asked to participate in weekly workshops to discuss and share their experiences in implementing the program. While the goal of these workshops was to monitor and advise manzaneras on such things as how to proceed when beneficiaries did not show up to pick up the goods or when they sent their children, the workshops became a space where women discussed problems that far exceeded the purpose of Plan Vida. As the plan's coordinator of Sargento Barrufaldi told me: "They began talking about their husbands, about their role as mothers, and the problems in their community."

It was during Plan Vida's meetings that women of Sargento Barrufaldi built their demands to have a program for adults to finish school and to have a health center in their community. The majority of manzaneras, as well as most beneficiaries, had to quit school to begin working or to take care of their siblings and/or as a result of young pregnancies. Women who had not finished primary or high school felt shame and were frustrated as a result of not being able to help in their children's education and in contributing to household income. As Rosa, a mother of five, told me, "I always felt bad because I

couldn't help my own children to do their homework." Others were disappointed by not being able to find employment due to their lack of formal education.

The idea of implementing a program for adults to finish school began during one of the weekly meetings when a group of manzaneras asked the program coordinator whether there was a possibility that she could give them classes to finish school. In response, the coordinator proposed that the women organize and pressure the local government to provide them with an official program with qualified teachers. Manzaneras asked for the help of well-known female activists in Sargento Barrufaldi. Collaboration among manzaneras, community organizers, and party activists was possible because manzaneras did not challenge existing local leaders; on the contrary, they sought their advice and help. In addition, local leaders and politicians began using manzaneras' networks of beneficiaries to transmit information about events and activities that were going to take place in the community.

After more than a year of showing up at least three times a week at councilors' and executive officials' offices, the manzaneras managed to get the municipality to send them accredited teachers who would help them to finish school. Following this successful experience, manzaneras began demanding that a health center be established in their community and convinced the municipality to give them construction materials to build the center free of charge. The manzaneras' husbands and neighbors volunteered in the construction of the center, and once it was finished, the municipality provided some basic equipment, one nurse who is at the center daily, and a doctor who works at the center three times a week.

Women involved in Plan Vida also experienced significant changes in their personal lives, as Magdalena's story illustrates. As a mother of seven young children, Magdalena's everyday chores took most of her day and most of her energy. "By the end of the day, I was so exhausted, I only wanted to go to bed," she said. Magdalena's isolation was considerable given that she did not have either family or friends in Sargento Barrufaldi. She said:

Because I never have money I don't buy magazines, newspapers. It was like living inside a prison cell, always at home with the children. It was like all I cared about was my home, stuck in here, but it was also because my husband was so . . . how can I put this? I can't put it into words . . . as not to get in trouble with him. My life has changed a lot since I started with the program. That's when I started going to these meetings that they had.

Magdalena's capacity "to deal with her husband without getting into trouble" was an uncalculated achievement of Plan Vida's workshops. After becoming a *manzanera*, Magdalena began questioning her husband's idea that she could not finish her studies. Magdalena's husband always told her that she would never be able to either find a job or finish school, a stigma that she carried on silently. By the time I left Sargento Barrufaldi, Magdalena had reached an agreement with her husband for her to be able to finish school. Magdalena never expected her husband to help her in cooking, cleaning, and raising the children; those were still her duties as a mother and a wife. Nevertheless, she thought she had won "a big battle" by being given the opportunity to finish school.

Further research is needed to study if and how a welfare program can affect the individual lives of those who live in communities targeted with these instruments of public policy. While the empowerment of a group of residents can have a direct effect on the lives of those who do not belong to the program by the provision of social services, there seems to be no change in the everyday lives of those who are left behind.

I met Jacinta when she was waiting to pick up four out of her seven children after school. She was neither a beneficiary nor a *manzanera* but knew the Plan Vida well and considered it helpful for the community. "I wish there was something like that when I had my children," she told me with a hint of nostalgia. Since she was not included in the plan, Jacinta did not attend the weekly meetings and workshops, and although she had visited the health center, she was not enrolled in the school program. She said her life, therefore, had not experienced any significant change since the implementation of Plan Vida. Jacinta's world was still the same as her grandmother's, mother's, and daughter's: "For me, the world is my home, my husband, and my children."

In contrasting Jacinta's testimony with that of the *manzaneras* and their beneficiaries, we observe the limits of women's empowerment in Sargento Barrufaldi. Still, I believe that Jacinta will recognize that to have a health center is better than not to have one. The difference between women who have been involved in Plan Vida and those who have not not also enables me to challenge existing assumptions about the use of traditional gender roles to reproduce and sustain women's oppression.

Feminist scholars constantly point out how programs like Plan Vida contribute to the reinforcement of the role of women as mothers who take care of the poor. In Argentina, this relationship became both explicit and significant in the figure of Eva Perón. In a chapter dedicated to “Doña María’s story for gender,” historian Daniel James argues that since its origins between 1945 and 1955 Peronism “both mobilized and legitimized women as actors within a newly enlarged public sphere. . . . Women’s political activity was taken to derive from their unique virtues as mothers, wives, and guardians of the hearth. They were intrinsically unselfish, capable of self-sacrifice and communal in nature, not the greedy individualists symbolized by men in politics” (2000, 220). Building on this tradition, as soon as Chiche Duhalde created and implemented Plan Vida in the province of Buenos Aires, political analysts, scholars, and journalists began to compare her to Evita.

In demonstrating the success of Plan Vida in empowering women as mothers, my work contributes to a body of literature that focuses on how women use traditional gender roles to challenge authoritarian and repressive regimes and fight for recognition (Jelin 1985; Jelin 1987; Jaquette 1989; Escobar and Alvarez 1992; Feijoó 1989). While exploiting women’s roles as mothers to make them work daily with almost no compensation, Plan Vida nevertheless has provided *manzaneras* and beneficiaries with the opportunity to think critically about their individual and collective lives. As a result of this recognition, more than sixty women in the community have finished school and even more have received health care.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PROGRAMS

Manzaneras’ empowerment, manifested through their increasing demands, became threatening to public officials in Sargento Barrufaldi. Whereas local officials dealt daily with demands from community organizers and brokers, they always asked for and in most cases obtained something in exchange. With the manzaneras, the quid pro quo logic did not work, and the 1997 Peronist electoral defeats provided municipal politicians with an excuse to remove the scheduled local meetings of manzaneras included in the program that had contributed to empowering women.

Plan Vida continues to deliver goods, but the weekly meetings and workshops that contributed so much to manzaneras’ empowerment have been reduced to monthly meetings at the city hall. Moreover, changes to the format and location of the workshops have led to a significant drop in attendance. While in the beginning manzaneras made the effort to find someone to take care of their children and spent their own money for transportation to attend the meetings, the mass character of the workshops in place now has made the meetings almost useless, and many women have stopped attending.

Ana, a manzanera of Sargento Barrufaldi who at first attended the new larger meetings, told me, “We couldn’t talk among ourselves, learn what was going on, even listen to the speakers, as they didn’t have a microphone, and we were more than a hundred in a conference room.” Accordingly, Ana and many others have stopped attending. Local politicians accomplished their goal of ending the empowerment of poor women; however, they could not take back either the

experience many of these women have gained or the changes they have undergone as a result of being involved in the plan.

When I returned to Sargento Barrufaldi in 2005, the community's local associations, the school, health center, and civic associations, were thriving. Plan Vida still has more than one million beneficiaries and employs 37,900 women (Ilari 2005). Since 2002, Plan Vida has been complemented with the *Plan Jefes y Jefas*, a program that subsidizes unemployed heads of households.⁴ Nevertheless, after the country's economic meltdown in 2001 that led more than half of the population into poverty,⁵ a new problem has emerged in Sargento Barrufaldi, as in most poor communities of Greater Buenos Aires: the paco.

A highly addictive form of cocaine of very low quality that sells for cheap on the street corners of Greater Buenos Aires, paco is killing poor Argentine youth who engage in criminal activity to sustain their vice. The local and international media began paying close attention to this phenomenon mostly after several mothers began pressuring the government to do something to stop the sale of this drug (Taylor 2008). In Sargento Barrufaldi, many mothers who joined the organization of "Mothers Against Paco" were former manzaneras. Empowering women to organize and better their lives through political activism, as Plan Vida has done, could have unexpected positive consequences for campaigns such as the fight against paco and is clearly a valuable aspect of social policy.

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ENDNOTES

¹ “Duhalde’s Army of Manzaneras” was the title of a widely circulated article printed in *Clarín* in October 1997.

² In “Conflicts over Credit: Re-Evaluating the Empowerment Potential of Loans to Women in Rural Bangladesh,” feminist economist Naila Kabeer (2001) understands empowerment as the expansion of choices available for women.

³ For general information at the national level and in the province of Buenos Aires, I consulted *Clarín*, *La Nación*, and *Página/12* newspapers. For provincial information in Córdoba, I reviewed *La Voz del Interior* and *La Mañana de Córdoba*. For municipal information of San Miguel, José C. Paz, and Malvinas Argentina, I read *La Hoja*, *La Nueva Provincia* for Bahía Blanca, and *El Puntal* for Río Cuarto.

⁴ Plan Jefes y Jefas was launched when the country’s population living below the poverty line went from 38 percent to 57 percent in less than one year. The program distributes 150 pesos (\$50) to families with children (younger than eighteen years old) where the head of the household is unemployed.

⁵ According to the Argentine National Institute of Statistics and Censuses (INDEC), poverty among residents of Greater Buenos Aires reached 61 percent in 2003.