

# Gender Policies in Argentina after Neoliberalism

## Opportunities and Obstacles for Women's Rights

by  
Debora Lopreite

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*After a decade of neoliberalism under the social-conservative administration of Carlos Menem (1989–1999), with its negative effects on women's rights, the 2001–2002 economic crises created new opportunities for women. The Menem administration initiated a gender-equality agenda with its quota for women candidates for the Congress and its adoption of the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, but it clashed with women's groups on reproductive rights. While the two Kirchner administrations (2003–present) established programs for sexual health and responsible procreation, they reverted to maternalism in their programs for social assistance for poor mothers and family support. The Consejo Nacional de la Mujer (National Women's Council), created during the Menem administration, took on more responsibility for delivering social assistance but abandoned its original gender-equality mandate.*

*Luego de una década de neoliberalismo bajo la administración conservadora-social de Carlos Menem (1989–1999), con sus efectos negativos sobre los derechos de las mujeres, las crisis económicas de 2001–2002 crearon nuevas oportunidades para las mujeres. La administración Menem inició una agenda de igualdad de género con la adopción de la cuota para candidatas mujeres para el Congreso y la adopción del Convención sobre la Eliminación de Todas las Formas de Discriminación contra la Mujer de la ONU, pero chocó con los grupos de mujeres sobre derechos reproductivos. Aunque las dos administraciones Kirchner (2003 al presente) establecieron programas para la salud sexual y la procreación responsable, volvieron al maternalismo en sus programas de asistencia social para mujeres pobres y el apoyo familiar. El Consejo Nacional de la Mujer, creado durante la administración Menem, se comprometió más en la entrega de asistencia social pero abandonó su mandato original de igualdad de género.*

**Keywords:** *Gender equality, Maternalism, Reproductive rights, Argentina, Neoliberalism*

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Although the democratization of Argentina in 1983 was a political opportunity for the advancement of women's rights, the neoliberalism and social conservatism of the 1990s created obstacles to the subsequent development of gender policies. A gender-equality agenda was initiated with the ratification in 1985 of the UN's Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the establishment in 1991 of a quota of a minimum of 30 percent women candidates for the Congress, and the creation in 1992 of the Consejo Nacional de la Mujer (National Women's Council—CNM [since 2009 known as the Consejo Nacional de las Mujeres]). The founding of the

Debora Lopreite is an adjunct research professor in the Institute of Political Economy at Carleton University.

LATIN AMERICAN PERSPECTIVES, Issue XXX, Vol. XX No. X, Month XXXX xx-xx  
DOI: 10.1177/0094582X13492709  
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CNM was part of a global process of establishment of mechanisms for promoting and monitoring a gender perspective in public policy. The goal of this process, known as “gender mainstreaming,” was gender equality through policies that advanced women’s rights in the areas of violence against women, equal pay for equal work, reproductive rights, and the participation of women in decision making (Kardam, 2004). However, welfare retrenchment during the 1990s was directed at the family allowance system, many women were suddenly incorporated into the labor market, and President Carlos Menem, supported by the Vatican, opposed reproductive rights. The 2001–2002 economic crises launched a post-neoliberal framework based on poverty reduction and social inclusion and created some opportunities for women to advance their rights, fostering programs for sexual health and responsible procreation, but social assistance for poor mothers and family support was dominated by maternalism. As the CNM took on more responsibility for delivering social assistance, it abandoned its original gender-equality mandate.

### NEOLIBERALISM AND THE CHALLENGES OF WOMEN’S RIGHTS

The creation of the CNM had its antecedents in a 1991 presidential decree that established the Consejo Coordinador de Políticas Públicas para la Mujer (Coordinating Council of Public Policies for Women). The CNM, also established by presidential decree, was at first a “subsecretariat” of this council reporting to the executive. A year later, however, it acquired the status of a “secretariat of state” with the mission of implementing the quota law. Despite this upgrade, it was not created by the Congress, and this meant that its operation was left to the discretion of political executives (Waylen, 2000). Its establishment, which coincided with the adoption of the neoliberal agenda promoted by the Washington Consensus, was part of a modernization of the state that was intended to improve the administrative performance of the bureaucracy and take positive steps toward including women in the public sector.

Under the leadership of Virginia Franganillo, a member of the Peronist women’s movement, the CNM promoted interaction with women’s associations, produced an equal-opportunities plan for 1993–1994, and established many programs to increase women’s political participation. It also had an important role in the UN’s 1995 women’s conference in Beijing (Virginia Franganillo, interview, Buenos Aires, October 27, 2005). During this period the Congress passed a law against domestic violence and the president issued a decree prohibiting sexual harassment in public administration.

Despite these advances, conflict arose over reproductive rights. The CNM was committed to reproductive rights through the adoption of several programs to be implemented in the Argentine provinces, but Menem allied himself with the Catholic Church in resisting international pressures in favor of such rights. He also attempted to introduce a clause prohibiting abortion into the new constitution. The conflict led to Franganillo’s resignation from the CNM presidency in 1994. At the Cairo Conference on Population and Development in 1994 and the Beijing women’s conference, the Argentine government introduced reservations to the final documents that were aimed at

protecting the traditional nuclear family and rejecting the concept of reproductive rights. The government argued that Argentina supported the original CEDAW text, which did not use the term “reproductive rights” but noted that individuals had the right to decide on the number of children they would have and the interval between them (United Nations, 1979: Art. 16) without specifying which family member should make decisions regarding family planning. It considered the concept of reproductive rights a euphemism for legal abortion and methods of contraception that amounted to abortion.

The divide between Menem and the women’s movement was obvious by 1995, when a group of female legislators—including those aligned with the government party—submitted a bill on family planning to the Congress. Despite Menem’s opposition, 15 of Argentina’s 23 provinces adopted reproductive rights policies between 1991 and 2001. Twelve of these programs were authorized by provincial legislatures, and activist networks including local legislators and civil society organizations insisted on their implementation. Menem issued two decrees, one in 1997 and another in 1998, aimed at complying (on selected issues) with the Beijing and CEDAW directives and positioning Argentina among democratic countries that promote gender equality and the reconciliation of work and family life. The agenda remained ambiguous, however, in that it did not reformulate gender relations within the family. More important, the pro-market macroeconomic framework put constraints on the development of policies to help integrate women into the labor market. Although they set a precedent for women’s labor rights, these norms were not implemented.

Menem’s gender policy, modified to suit his technocratic agenda, included the creation in 1995 of an ad-hoc commission in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to follow up on the Beijing conference and the appointment in 1996 of Esther Schiavone, an enthusiastic Menemist who opposed abortion, to head the CNM. In 2005–2008 the executive branch of government implemented a US\$15 million women’s program funded by the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) that included the creation of provincial women’s offices. The CNM agenda was enhanced by the development of gender-equality provisions mainly oriented toward maintaining parity between the sexes in the workplace and the reconciliation of work and family life. By executive decree in 1998, Menem instituted a national plan for equality of opportunities for women and men in the workplace.

The plan was an outgrowth of the CEDAW, the action platform of the Beijing conference, and the International Labor Organization’s Treaty 156 on equality of treatment and opportunity for men and women workers, in particular workers with “family responsibilities.” In 1998, as part of this policy, Menem created a commission administered by the Ministry of Labor, Employment and Social Security whose goal was to increase women’s opportunities in the labor market through the creation of special employment programs such as microfinance credits, training oriented toward workfare, and equal pay for equal work. The commission’s mandate also included the standardization of domestic employment and a national survey to determine the availability and functioning of child care services and day care facilities. An earlier executive decree, in 1997, had already established equality of treatment for male and female public servants and the regulation of parental leaves. Because of the structural constraints of the labor market, these decrees were only partially implemented.

Argentine feminists did not approve of Menem's agenda. Though he attempted to appear women-friendly, his official opposition to the reproductive rights agenda in several international conferences and his isolation from the autonomous women's movement resulted in the delegitimation of the CNM as a means to advance gender equality. In addition, there was a radicalization of the reproductive rights debate in the 1990s when Menem's agenda explicitly excluded it. In fact, the Argentine women's movement was more concerned with political and reproductive rights than with other women's issues.

In 1999 a new government was elected that opposed Menem's conservatism. However, because of internal divisions, the moderate center-left coalition was politically weak and incapable of resolving the economic crisis, while the CNM continued to be a center of conflict among women from different groups and parties (Carmen Storani, interview, Buenos Aires, October 6, 2005). Technically and politically bound to macroeconomic reform as a response to the crisis, the Fernando de la Rúa government collapsed in December 2001. The split between the Menem administration and women's groups and the successive economic and political crises contributed to the decline of the CNM.

### ECONOMIC TURMOIL AND A RENEWED FOCUS ON WOMEN

When President de la Rúa resigned, a provisional government based on an agreement of the Congress was installed. President Eduardo Duhalde of the Peronist Party was appointed and given the mandate to deal with the crisis and call elections to choose a new president. The financial crises of 2001–2002 greatly increased poverty and inequality, and unemployment and informal work rose to unprecedented levels. Poverty peaked in 2002, when 57.2 percent of the population was impoverished and 27.5 percent were living in extreme poverty. In May 2002 unemployment reached 21.5 percent (Tabbush, 2009). Duhalde declared default on the nation's debt, devaluated the peso, and implemented a set of social policies oriented toward reducing the effects of the disastrous economic situation.

The high levels of female and child poverty called for social assistance for vulnerable groups, and this was supported by the IDB. The family allowance program for formal registered workers was maintained, but because of the persistent informality of the labor market and increasing poverty it was merged with a program for transferring cash to needy families. Impoverished women became the focus of social assistance and poverty reduction. Two programs were designed to address the dramatic social situation: the Plan Jefes y Jefas de Hogar (Male and Female-Headed Households Plan) and the Plan Familias (Families Plan). Basically a workfare program, the first of these plans targeted unemployed heads of households—regardless of gender—who were responsible for a child under 18 or caring for a disabled or pregnant spouse. Despite the program's gender-neutral design, the high female unemployment levels made 71 percent of its beneficiaries women in their reproductive years (30–40) with low (elementary) educational levels. These women came from the poorest sectors of the population. They tended to live in households averaging about five members and had high unemployment rates and low levels of economic

activity (Tabbush, 2009). The program's ultimate goal was to reinstate unemployed women in the labor market, but most of the jobs available to women were unreliable and concentrated in the domestic private sector. Though the program did not have a major impact on reducing poverty, it did contribute to reducing indigence by 3 percent in 2003. It was criticized by the Catholic Church, the political opposition, and various social groups for fostering clientelism and failing to "encourag[e] a culture of work" (Tabbush, 2009: 308).

The new poverty reduction strategy and impoverishment itself revived the debate on reproductive rights. President Eduardo Duhalde (2002–2003) was a devout Catholic and an advocate of Christian social doctrine, but he appointed as his minister of health an international health expert, Ginés González García, who led an enthusiastic campaign for maternal health care, family planning, and the distribution of generic drugs to impoverished families. González's policy priorities included reducing maternal and child mortality and providing access to contraceptive services. As health minister he had the power to deal with these issues at the federal level, and he was key in promoting the implementation of the reproductive health program. His technical expertise, combined with encouragement from the international discourse on reproductive rights and health, essentially gave him control of the state bureaucracy. While promoting pro-poor policies, however, legislators conveyed their moral objection to legal abortion. Efforts at reform widened the gap between the government and the Catholic Church, and tensions escalated in 2006 and 2007 under the Néstor Kirchner administration (*La Nación*, August 6, 2006).

### FROM KIRCHNER TO KIRCHNER: A RETURN TO MATERNALISM

Néstor Kirchner, of the Peronist Party, was elected in 2003, and he continued the policies implemented by Duhalde over the previous two years. Under the new family policy, Kirchner gave the CNM a new role and mission, positioning it within the Consejo Nacional de Coordinación de Políticas Sociales (National Council for Social Policy Coordination), which was originally headed by his sister, Alicia Kirchner. Maria Lucila Colombo, the new president of the CNM, had been an activist in the Sindicato de Amas de Casa (Housewives' Union) and had adopted an antiabortion position in the legislative debate on reproductive health when she was in the Buenos Aires city legislature in 2000. She was a member of Nueva Dirigencia (New Leadership)—a party founded by Gustavo Beliz, the activist Catholic former minister of the interior, who had strong links to the Church. The CNM's mission under her leadership was strengthening the role of the family in the face of economic and social fragmentation while redefining traditional gender roles. This new approach, rather than focusing on individual actors (child, woman, poor person), attempted to include them in a comprehensive and integrative perspective on the family. The government's use of a World Bank loan as part of its supposedly post-Washington Consensus poverty reduction agenda is a good example of this new focus on families. PROFAM (Family Strengthening and Social Capital Promotion Project) was funded by the bank for US\$5 million and administered by the CNM. The CNM was selected to manage the program because it was "an autonomous organization that seeks to decentralize its community interventions to the grassroots

level, maintaining only the administrative functions and those responsibilities related to the articulation of social policy formulation at the central level" (World Bank, 2001: 21). The program adopted a "social capital" approach that assumes that communities with higher levels of social capital are more likely to organize, identify common goals, and pursue them. Its principal activity was a demand-driven grant program to help promote and strengthen the capacity of families to participate in their communities. The program targeted poor communities where "domestic violence against women and children, teen pregnancy, juvenile delinquency, and substance and alcohol abuse are higher" and "poor areas where there is a lack of access to reproductive health information and options, including child care."

Focused on poverty, these programs were enacted at the expense of gender equality. Plan Jefas fostered insecure paid jobs for men and provided minimal social representation for women in the form of an allowance rather than an income. Genuine employment was unavailable, so women tended to stay in the program, and this led the government to move them into Plan Familias, which paid cash transfers to poor women under conditions that reinforced their traditional gender roles as mothers. This reinforced differentiated roles for men and women and discouraged women from seeking non-motherhood paid employment (Tabbush, 2009).

After the government of Cristina Kirchner lost the mid-term elections in 2009, the executive supported legislation to provide a universal child allowance. This program was intended to provide compensatory income for families while encouraging vaccination and school attendance. Though the program had a gender-neutral design, in practice 98 percent of the direct recipients of the allowance were mothers. In March 2011 the World Bank announced a new social protection program to expand the universal child allowance that included the provision of technical assistance to continue its implementation. As had the previous programs, the child allowance helped reduce poverty, but it did not promote paid labor for women and therefore reinforced traditional domestic roles.

With respect to social assistance policies for poor mothers and their families, the CNM had lost its original mainstreaming purpose. However, some of the policies it implemented did address some of the women's issues on the international and regional gender agenda. It was actively involved in issues such as domestic violence and the recommendations of the Economic Commission on Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) on the value of women's unpaid work (Lucila Colombo, interview, Buenos Aires, October 25, 2005). After Colombo's presidency, however, the CNM kept its distance from most feminist organizations (Cristina Zurutuza, interview, Buenos Aires, November 22, 2005). The fact that it lacked a feminist perspective is key to understanding the limits on advancing comprehensive gender-equality concerns in the national bureaucracy. Several women's activists have shown that the Ministry of Health was the only government entity in which the implementation of a gender-equality agenda was clear (Mabel Bianco, interview, Buenos Aires, November 24, 2005). Most agreed that institutions such as the CNM were "empty" organizations with respect to women's affairs.

However, Kirchner changed the situation on the international front in the field of reproductive rights. He appointed Juliana Di Tullio head of the International Women's Office in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and withdrew

the reservations that Menem had introduced at the Cairo and Beijing conferences (Juliana Di Tullio, interview, Buenos Aires, June 22, 2011). At the 2004 Ninth Women's Regional Conference of ECLAC in Mexico City, for the first time the Argentine government committed to all the elements without reservations, including reproductive rights and the CEDAW optional protocol (an instrument providing access to justice for women denied their rights in the national arena by permitting them to have their claims reviewed at the international level by a committee of independent experts).

On the domestic front, Kirchner advanced reproductive rights more strongly than his predecessor. A committee of experts from the Ministry of Justice drafted a bill to reform the penal code early in 2006, and it included a change to the controversial Article 86 on abortion. The change stated that a woman would "not be punished when an abortion is performed with her consent and within the first three months of pregnancy if the circumstances are excusable" (*La Nación*, March 24, 2007). Media dissemination of this amendment generated strong reactions from conservative groups and prompted the minister of the interior, Aníbal Fernández, to state that the federal government was not unilaterally promoting the decriminalization of abortion. He also declared, "This is, however, an issue that society must debate" (*La Nación*, March 24, 2007). González was very active in what he called an "antiabortion campaign" to combat maternal mortality and unsafe abortion.

Progress ceased when President Cristina Kirchner, who succeeded her husband, Néstor Kirchner, in 2007, explicitly opposed abortion, asserting that her stance was correct according to her Catholic faith. She dismissed González and appointed two successive ministers (Graciela Ocaña and Juan Mansur) who did little to further the sexual health program of 2003 or promote the legalization of abortion. In fact, Human Rights Watch (2010) questioned the efficiency of contraceptive delivery from the federal government to the provinces.

Legal abortion is becoming more controversial, particularly with respect to when an abortion can be performed. As in other Latin American countries, abortion in Argentina is permitted in cases of medical necessity and rape, including the presumed rape of mentally handicapped women. The original wording of Argentina's abortion law, however, has typically generated constitutional controversy and prompted debate. The final section of Article 86 has been particularly contentious, as it states that abortion is not punishable "if the pregnancy results from a rape or an assault on chastity (*pudor*) committed against a mentally handicapped or mentally ill woman." This wording has been attributed to a mistake in translation from the original French text, which stated that abortion was not punishable when it was the result of rape or the rape of a mentally handicapped or mentally ill woman (Htun, 2003). This mistaken interpretation has been a major barrier for women seeking abortions under specific legal conditions. A procedural guide was developed for dissemination among health professionals during González's tenure. It stated that the more liberal interpretation of the penal code had to be applied and established steps that doctors should follow in order to provide the service. However, the 2007 change in government created less women-friendly circumstances for the advancement of reproductive rights at the federal level.

Graciela Ocaña, the newly appointed minister of health, declared that abortion was solely a matter of criminal law and therefore not her responsibility.

She did not abolish the guide, but she did renounce the administrative procedure to be developed by the federal ministry. In 2010 the coordinator of the ministry's sexual health program published a new guide, but the new minister, Juan Mansur, refused to endorse it, creating a new public controversy. The guide ultimately remained on the Ministry's web site for distribution (Human Rights Watch, 2010).

To summarize, under post-neoliberal conditions the adoption of family-planning services and social policies for women has been a consequence of the need to focus on combating poverty. Despite the discourse of social inclusion, women's issues have not been considered policy priorities. For example, the government of Cristina Kirchner recently announced an extension of the child allowance to pregnant women but without developing the reproductive health services necessary for poor women to make informed decisions.

### WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION IN CHANGING TIMES

For women in Argentina, the legislative arena is an important public venue, particularly since the adoption and implementation of the legislative quota made the country a regional pioneer. Up to 1991 the political representation of women in the Congress had been very limited, and the legislative quota opened up winnable positions on the closed party lists. For example, in the election of 1983 only 3.6 percent of the new deputies were women, and this was sustained in the 1985 and 1987 elections. The progressive inclusion of women in representative positions contributed to a better understanding of their demands and to more effective coalitions in support of gender policies. The proportion of elected women deputies rose to 27.7 percent in 1995, and in 2005 35 percent of the deputies and 41.7 percent of the senators were women (Borner et al., 2007). The CNM supported the women's coalition and actively participated in its political campaigns. The feminist strategy for improving the law was "to stress that quotas would help to make Argentina a modern and fully democratic society and they were attempting to use the opportunities afforded by the political context of consolidation" (Waylen, 2000: 776).

A number of feminist activists have criticized some female legislators' lack of commitment to gender equality, but they recognize that women's networking is an important strategy for advancing reproductive rights in local legislatures and the Congress (Belkis Karlen, interview, Buenos Aires, November 14, 2005). Indeed, women politicians acknowledge that recent coordinated activity in the Congress has attracted women from right-wing parties. A deputy of the Socialist Party argued, "With the years we all have learned. For example, in 2006 we worked together much better than we did in the previous years" (Silvia Augsburger, interview, Buenos Aires, May 23, 2007). With respect to feminist achievements in 2006, she alluded to the contraceptive surgery law, sex education, and the ratification of the optional protocol of the CEDAW. Others are more skeptical but agree that women working together—inside and outside Congress—were important in achieving the quota law and contributed to framing the reproductive-rights debate (Juliana Marino, interview, Buenos Aires, June 15, 2007).

One of the central debates during the national constitutional reform of 1994 demonstrated the effectiveness of the women's quota. Women representatives made up 26 percent of the convention participants, and their contributions to the debate were key to the rejection of an explicit antiabortion clause in the new constitution. Women's advocacy was also important in the incorporation of the CEDAW into the constitution, making Argentina the only member state in which this incorporation took place. In addition, after a decade of struggle the quota law played an essential role in promoting specific women's issues such as the female quota in trade unions and a program for sexual health and responsible procreation that attempts to ensure reproductive rights by providing access to contraception and counseling. Furthermore, in 2006 the Congress ratified contraceptive surgery (tubal ligation and vasectomy) and sex education in high schools. The votes for both these laws revealed a gender gap; 61.3 percent of women in the Senate and only 39 percent of the men voted for the contraceptive surgery law. Male absence was higher than female absence; 48.8 percent of male senators were not in attendance, compared with 25.8 percent of female senators. The four women who voted against the law included the former first lady, Hilda Duhalde, who had been a supporter of the sexual health law passed in 2003. Of the 257 deputies, 66 were absent, and 72.7 percent of these absentees were males. The law passed with 147 positive votes by legislators from the Unión Cívica Radical, the Frente para la Victoria, and Argentina por una República de Iguales, while Peronismo Federal, Propuesta Republicana, and minor provincial party members voted against it. The law establishing sex education in schools passed with a near-unanimous vote in the Chamber of Deputies, with the lone negative vote being cast by Lux Klein of the extreme right-wing Fuerza Republicana. Once again, male absence was higher; of the 86 absent legislators, 74.4 percent were male. In 2009 a bill that addressed violence against women was passed by the Congress.

The implementation of these laws has been plagued by delays and inefficiencies and a lack of the political will to advance the policies on the part of the bureaucratic state (Human Rights Watch, 2010). Women have increased their political representation over the past two decades, and this has been significant in moving ahead on some gender issues (Borner et al., 2009). However, it has been difficult for women to penetrate the bureaucracy of the state, and this has allowed the gender policy agenda to remain at the discretion of presidents. The effects of the increased number of female representatives began to appear during the post-neoliberal period and created new opportunities to advance women's rights, but political party conflict in the Congress hindered this advance. Uneven state support for the gender agenda, the division of women activists along party lines, and tension between women's groups and the state have prevailed.

## CONCLUSIONS

The democratization that began in 1983 provided Argentine women with opportunities to affect the structure of representation through institutional change. The changes impacted the electoral regime and facilitated the creation

of women's political apparatuses in the national and provincial governments. Moreover, the opportunities provided by the international context contributed to a domestic focus on gender-based programs and policies. However, the neoliberal policies implemented in the 1990s had a negative effect on social citizenship and on women in particular. The success of women activists in the legislative arena contrasted with the limits they faced in accessing the bureaucratic structure of the state. Menem's technocratic administration was in conflict with the women's agenda on reproductive rights and female political empowerment in general. In fact, presidents controlled gender policy and at times used their power to select issues from the global agenda according to their own political ideologies. In post-neoliberal times there was a step backward to maternalism linked to social assistance that (with the exception of the universal child allowance) stigmatized the poor. Social assistance policies have reinforced traditional gender roles for poor women, although there are no child care services that could help alleviate their domestic responsibilities or promote paid labor. Though reproductive rights were addressed under González during the Duhalde and Néstor Kirchner administrations, the sexual health program has not been a policy priority of the Cristina Kirchner administration, and therefore there has been no advance in the decriminalization of abortion. In sum, the adoption of a comprehensive gender agenda has been limited.

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