



A regular series of notes highlighting recent lessons emerging from the operational and analytical program of the World Bank's Latin America and Caribbean Region.

ARGENTINA Women weaving equitable gender relations

Josefina Stubbs and Daniela Fernandez

CONTEXT

In 2001, after a long period of recession, Argentina faced the greatest economic, political and institutional crisis in its history. Unemployment reached levels nearing 18% and the poverty rate reached a peak of 58% in 2002, increasing twofold the number of people living below the poverty line and impacting—in a disproportionate manner—the most vulnerable and poverty stricken families.

The crisis also had a tremendous impact on Argentina's middle-class. Increased unemployment and the freezing of wages and bank deposits forced many families to face poverty for the first time, and to seek new survival strategies. The crisis caused the rupture of traditional roles within the household, forcing many women into the workforce, many young people to leave school in search of a job, and many traditional breadwinners to remain at home. In many cases, these changes challenged not just the economic viability of households but the role of families.

Recognizing the potential impact of the situation, the Government of Argentina approached the World Bank for a small loan (\$5 million), aimed at promoting gender equity and the development of families through the Family Strengthening and Social Capital Promotion Project (PROFAM).

PROFAM

The main objective of PROFAM was to address the vulnerability of the poorest and weakest segments of the

population by targeting families as a comprehensive unit, and by strengthening the development of each member, from a gender perspective.

To reach these goals, the Project sought to support, monitor and learn from sub-projects administered by local governments and community-based organizations, focused on reducing the vulnerability of poor families and on promoting changes in gender relations and their impact on family issues.



PROFAM actively promoted coordinated and cohesive cooperation between civil society organizations, local governments and the families themselves, and strengthened local capabilities to design, manage and implement projects through associative networks. PROFAM also encouraged the joint development of alternative poverty-reduction strategies, focusing on extremely vulnerable families.

PROFAM's structure was based on three components: First, the "Family and Social Capital Strengthening" component, which in turn comprised two sub-components: (i) an Equity Fund, which provided support to community-based and/or local government sub-projects; and (ii) a Social Capital Strengthening program, which provided funding for network promotion activities to rebuild the social fabric. Second, the "Gender and Community Awareness" component, aimed at raising awareness of the importance of equitable gender relations within the community. Lastly, the "Institutional Development" component, aimed at strengthening the Project's Implementation Unit within the National Women's Council.

Equity Fund

This component was centered on a small grants program that supported sub-projects developed by community-based organizations and local governments, and focused on poor and/or vulnerable families.

The sub-projects had to be framed within the context of some of the eligible topics set forth by the program, such as sexual and reproductive health, domestic violence, responsible parenthood, social rights and citizenship, culture and recreation, and environmental awareness. Topics centered on religious or political activities were excluded.

Sub-projects had to include certain attributes. They had to: (a) include a gender perspective that took into consideration the priorities of both men and women; (b) strengthen partnerships among local governments, community-based organizations, and families; and (c) incorporate potential beneficiaries in the decision-making processes in a participative manner.

Proposals could not exceed US\$30,000, with a community contribution of at least 20% of the amount requested. During the drafting stage, the Implementation Unit provided technical assistance to organizations lacking expertise in how best to incorporate gender issues in their work.

Strengthening Social Capital

This component aimed to strengthen existing networks, local governments, community-based organizations and other civil society organizations, through capacity-building interventions and technical assistance and, in some instances, through the delivery of basic equipment, such as computers and printers.

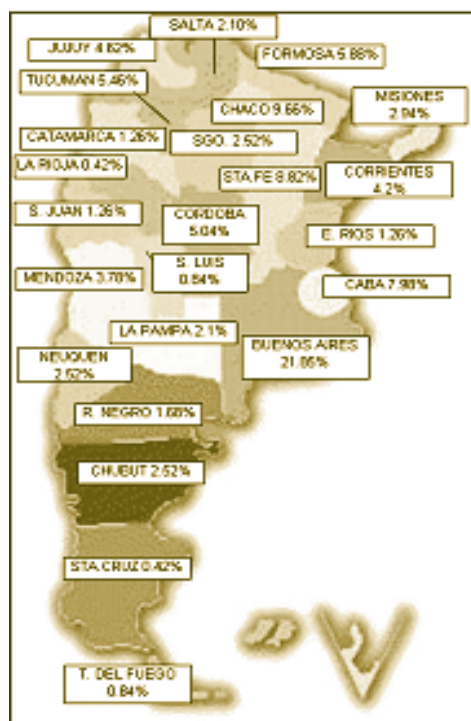
A cohesive effort among families, civil society and governmental organizations was promoted that improved family participation in the design, implementation and supervision of community-based initiatives.

OUTCOMES

Through the “Family and Social Capital Strengthening” component, PROFAM financed, throughout the country, 221 sub-projects developed by 200 community-based organizations and 41 local governments, reaching over 49,100 direct and indirect beneficiaries, 80% of which were women. 64% of PROFAM’s funds were allocated under this component.

Working around ten key issues –domestic violence, sexual and reproductive health, responsible parenthood, social rights and citizenship, culture and recreation, environment, resilience, rural development, tourism, and production support- the sub-projects provided support ranging from technical assistance to funding for small construction works.

In terms of issues, domestic violence was reported as the most relevant issue for women (12,163) and the second most relevant for men (2,417), while sexual and reproductive health issues generated equal interest among both men and women. Within these subjects, participants identified certain key needs in particular. For instance, under “domestic violence”, 50.8% of the organizations provided training on legal assistance to the victims, 32.8% on the detection of violence, and 21.2% on protection of victims. Organizations reported significant numbers of victims of violence among their beneficiaries (42% of the beneficiaries, both men and women), and were forced to implement interventions to address this issue.



PROFAM: Projects by Province

Most sub-projects incorporated a gender perspective using methodologies based on group dynamics, aimed at reducing the isolation of women and on raising their awareness as to the importance of sharing their concerns with others. As a result, many female participants established local women associations.

The objective of those sub-projects that dealt with issues related to social rights and citizenship, and production support, was to help women to improve their skills, their income generation capacity and, more importantly, their self-esteem. As a result, the men and other family mem-

bers began to agree to take care of the children so that women could attend the meetings. Some women – individually or collectively- began their own productive projects. As one of the female participants noted, “We learned to make a joint effort in order to be able to work; we really needed to get out of our homes, and now, we demand respect from our partners,”

The sub-projects that addressed responsible parenthood sought to improve family relationships by clarifying the roles of each family member. Some women were able to recognize their own violent behaviors in their interaction with their children. As one of the beneficiaries explains: “The time I spent with the psychologist help me understand my children’s behavior, and to modify my own” In addition, there was an improvement in the communication between parents and children, mainly on difficult subjects including sex and drugs. Some of the teenage mothers participating in the program were also able to go back to school to complete their education.

The objective of the sub-projects dealing with sexual and reproductive health issues was to improve knowledge on these subjects, particularly among young people. Through the different workshops, the female participants were made aware of their rights and of the importance of taking decisions concerning their sex life, and family planning. In addition, youngsters, both male and female, increased their knowledge about reproductive health issues, and the significant role they can play as disseminators of this knowledge among their peers.



The main objectives of the sub-projects on domestic violence were to increase awareness of the problem, and to improve women’s access to agencies that work in this field. Both men and women noted that the program helped them understand the “circle of violence” and that it would help them to avoid falling prey to this. Both female and male beneficiaries subsequently created local networks to counsel and take action against cases of domestic violence. The projects also made an effort to disseminate knowledge regarding the services and resources provided by various government agencies to help women battle against this problem.

The Project also enhanced local social capital by strengthening and expanding the networks and social activities included in the sub-projects. Of the 213 organizations assessed, 60% stated that –as a result of the activities performed within the project’s framework- they were able to link up with other civil society organizations, 51% connected with local governments, and 46% with provincial governments. Furthermore, 49% of the participant organizations exchanged experiences and consultations with local governments, while 61% did so with other civil society organizations.

Under the second Component, 13 communication campaigns and 6 regional meetings were performed together with the sub-projects’ beneficiaries, and a series of videos that featured participants’ testimonials were produced.

CHALLENGES FACED BY THE PROGRAM

The economic crisis flared up two months after the signing of the Loan Agreement, triggering a profound institutional and political crisis, which included the resignation of president Fernando de la Rúa and five subsequent presidents over a seven-day period. While this delayed the Project, the unfolding situation reinforced the relevance of PROFAM’s objectives.

In addition, the Convertibility Plan tripled the value of the dollar and, therefore, the size of the Program (it should be remembered that the loan amounted to US\$5,000,000). This became a challenge for the Implementation Unit, which was designed to manage a program three times smaller.

Another major challenge faced during the project’s implementation was the work undertaken with community organizations. This work required the Implementation Unit to deliver a significant training effort. The Unit had to work side-by-side with participant organizations, providing technical assistance in the design, implementation, monitoring and accountability processes. Although this entailed significant effort, it shaped organizations with stronger management capacity, and became an additional achievement of the Program.

LESSONS LEARNED

Bring men and women together: 89.7% of participant organizations found that working jointly with men and women facilitated the integration of gender issues into the projects, and generated a better understanding of the roles and behaviors of each member of the family.

The integration of a gender perspective to a particular topic proved easier in some instances than in others.

Organizations focused exclusively on sexual and reproductive health, domestic violence, responsible parenthood, or social rights and citizenship, were found to be better equipped to understand and integrate the gender perspective. On the other hand, organizations targeting rural development, production support, culture and recreation, environment, and resilience issues, encountered more obstacles to the incorporation of a gender perspective and some desertion among participants, which rendered their actions less effective.

The group-dynamic methodology was found to be the best approach, with this methodology enabling interaction between beneficiaries. The use of more informal learning tools –such as theater, photographs, etc.- was also seen as a positive initiative that promoted a better understanding of messages and concepts. As both female and male beneficiaries of the Program stated, working in groups made them realize the benefits of sharing their problems, frustrations and concerns with their peers, thereby improving their capacity to grasp the root of the problem and discuss the different options to address them.

Those organizations that worked together with professionals in other fields and that expanded the scope of their projects by training promoters on how to approach domestic violence, obtained the best results. More than half stated that at least a six-month period was needed to properly train promoters, and that these promoters should play the role of facilitators between the beneficiaries and the specialist.

CONCLUSIONS

The approach and methodology used by the Program proved to be effective in reducing the vulnerability of families by empowering women, raising awareness among men, increasing female participation in decision-

making processes and interaction with the labor market, introducing mechanisms to identify violent behaviors and practices, and expanding family networks.

The awareness-raising activities developed by PROFAM and by the sub-projects, combined with the systematization of the Equity Fund experiences, gave way to the drafting of policies and legislation that strengthened gender equity in vital areas. The role of the National Women's Council within the new and recently passed Sexual and Reproductive Health Law, is the best example. The Council has bridged a significant gap in matters related to reproductive health, providing a unified framework for addressing the needs of individuals, families, and communities in connection with these issues.

In addition, gender equity principles were incorporated in many policies and programs, such as the program Familias por la Inclusión Social (Families for Social Inclusion), the Plan Nacional de Seguridad Alimentaria (National Food Security Plan), and the Plan Manos a la Obra (Let's Get to Work Plan), that evolved from an individual approach, with a passive beneficiary, to an approach that explicitly empowered families. The gender perspective was similarly incorporated into laws such as the Education Law, the Employment Law, and the different regulations that govern public employment.

Similarly, the participating organizations and local government agencies improved their interventions by incorporating a gender perspective, and were also able to build new capacities for designing, implementing and monitoring their projects. Many of the organizations that participated in PROFAM are currently engaged in social protection programs, delivering training and technical assistance.

Among the many testimonials delivered about PROFAM, one perhaps summarizes the impact of this Program on the lives of the individuals that took part in it: "This program gave me back my dignity as a woman."

About the Author

Josefina Stubbs is a Senior Social Development Specialist in the Sustainable Development Department of the Latin America and the Caribbean Region of the World Bank. Daniela Fernandez also works in this team.