

CASE STUDIES IN WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

A Story from Latin America

Argentina's Movement of Agricultural Women in Struggle (MMAL)

Edited by Norma Sanchís and Agustina Pérez Rial from IGTN Latin America¹

Lucy's story

Lucy's story is the story of debts incurred by small- and medium-scale farmers in the 1990s in Argentina. During this decade, small- and medium-scale rural producers were affected by the process of 'modernisation' implanted by the neoliberal model. This was the central issue around which the Movement of Agricultural Women in Struggle (MMAL) was initially organised. In addition to tackling the issue of farmers' debt, the MMAL was also critical of the political system and the banking sector. Its first collective action began spontaneously in a rural town in Argentina in May 1995, after Lucy de Cornelis received an announcement that her family farm was about to be auctioned off and started an individual action. Lucy was convinced that her family's debt was unjust.

Lucy is about 60 years old. She has four daughters and earns her living from a small farm in the Argentine *pampa*.² Through several years of intense activism to keep the family farm from going to auction, Lucy led a strong local and national network of 'women in struggle', as she liked to call the movement. Lucy feels empowered and proud because of the movement's successful action in the public sphere, against what the women in the movement feel are the unfair consequences of the government's poor decisions. In many aspects she is breaking traditional gender roles and rules. In addition to her activities as an activist, however, she is also a

¹ <http://www.igtn.org>

2. A highly productive agricultural region in the central-eastern area of the country.

housekeeper; she cooks, cleans and even bakes cakes if she has the time, before going out to join a protest or conduct an interview with the media.

In 1995, facing the imminent danger of losing her farm and feeling desperate after having 'knocked on every door', Lucy went to the local radio station in order to talk about her situation, appearing as the wife of an indebted farmer:

*... at night something said to me, 'You can do it', and the first thing that came to me was: go to the village radio station. At the station I explained what I was going through, and when I left the studio there were other women waiting for me outside because the same thing was happening to them ...*³

When she saw the women outside the radio station, Lucy proposed that they should organise a meeting.

*We went to newspapers to tell them that we were going to have an assembly; 350 women from different places in the province went to this first meeting in the town's sports and social club. I had never gone to an assembly, and didn't know what to do. So I said, 'Let's sing the National Anthem.' Everything was done in this spontaneous way; nothing was thought out or planned.*⁴

Singing the anthem and praying became the two main tactics the MMAL used at the auctions of the indebted farmers' properties from that first meeting onwards. These peaceful obstructionist methods were an innovation compared to previous forms of struggle. The movement adopted a radical view, distant from the traditional agrarian social organisations, and established new alliances between the women's movement and the movements of the 'new agrarian protest'.

The economic context and its impacts on daily life

3. Interview with Lucy de Cornelis by Karina Bidaseca, 2000.

4. Ibid.

The socio-economic crisis of the Argentine agricultural sector emerged from the impact of economic globalisation shaped by neoliberal policies. In the 1990s, the process of 'modernisation' affected small- and medium-scale rural producers in three basic ways: the total deregulation of the economy, the privatisation of public companies, and the liberalisation of international trade.

Capital vigorously entered the agricultural sector, focused on food and fibre production. There was also an increase in so-called 'agribusiness', with large estates increasing their competitiveness through the acquisition of modern technology.⁵ Small- and medium-scale farmers, wanting to continue their participation in the market, resorted to bank loans in order to buy machinery and new technology.

The generalised threat to the farmers' properties had its origin in these massive debts to the banks. Financing for the agricultural sector was barely above USD 2 billion in 1991, but when bank loans aimed at allowing the farmers to initiate the process of modernisation became available, this number rose and in 1995 exceeded USD 7 billion.

The situation worsened after 1995 because of international financial crises such as the East Asian crisis and the Mexican crisis (also known as the 'tequila crisis'), which had an especially profound impact in the Southern Cone, and Brazil's currency devaluation in 1999. Uncertainty in the Argentinian financial panorama was exacerbated by disagreements between domestic and foreign economic groups. All of this led to a situation in which deposits were steadily withdrawn, credit was retracted, and interest rates increased.

The farmers – totally unprotected by government policies – could not cover the high interest rates, and during the 1990s Argentinian farmers rose to the top of the list of irregular debtors. In December 1999 one in every four farmers was considered a 'delinquent client'.

5. Thus, the Argentine agrarian structure was modified: on the one hand, plots of up to 200 hectares represent 74.6 per cent of all enterprises, and 7.7 per cent of the total agricultural surface; on the other, plots of more than 5,000 hectares represent 1.6 per cent of all enterprises and 49.6 per cent of the total surface (National Agricultural Census, 1988).

The scope of the action widens

The MMAL's empowerment was made possible through the creation of social networks. In the beginning the actions took diverse forms: mobilisations, simple demonstrations and demonstrations led by farm tractors (*tractorazos*), processions, and occupations of roads, camps, public buildings, etc. After the highly visible initial actions there was a period of organisational reinforcement, during which time new rules for shared practices were created. Since 1995 the MMAL has held annual national, provincial and regional assemblies, as a way of assuring the continuity of the organisation. The structure of the organisation is flexible, without intermediate structures, and with a direct relation with the between leaders, local coordinators and the grass roots.

Nowadays the MMAL has a legal status as a farmers' union, and is increasing its presence at the national level. It is also recognised as an important actor in the national agrarian movement, which is traditionally made up of men.

Argentina's economic situation has resulted in more extensive demands by the movement; the MMAL has expanded its scope and established alliances with other sectors and social movements in both Argentina and other countries (such as El Barzón from Mexico and the MST from Brazil).

The MMAL's demands and strategies

The MMAL's immediate aim at the beginning of the movement was to bring the auctions of the indebted farmers' properties to a halt. Secondary aims included the analysis of the legitimacy of the debts, and the issuing of a request to refinance the debts in the long term. The MMAL is currently also looking into other issues, such as agricultural and economic policy, in order to confront the concentration of land in the hands of large landowners.

The MMAL combines several strategies and instruments of struggle:

- Direct action performed during the judicial auctions of the farmers' properties, with the intention of blocking the auctions. In cases where the MMAL is not successful in blocking the auction, the group takes photographs of the buyers 'to show who is the one who takes our fields'.
- Analysis of the cases of women who have asked the movement for help, including accompanying them in order to get adequate information about their economic situation. This also includes support in the search for juridical advice. As the MMAL receives requests for help from different towns, its representatives organise local meetings to inform, raise awareness, and bring support to women in similar situations.
- Negotiation with political and financial actors, bank authorities, rural unions and other social organisations. The apex of these negotiations was a face-to-face meeting with the leaders of the National Bank. At this meeting, the MMAL raised its demands for justice and urged the bank's authorities to recalculate their debts and reduce interests and defaults.
- Developing a media strategy in order to disseminate and amplify the movement's actions, invite other women in the same situation to join the movement and raise consciousness among the public.
- Keeping the MMAL exclusively a women's organisation.
- Independence and autonomy from the political system and the government.

Main achievements

A national press release signed by the MMAL, dated 8 March 2001, lists what the group calls 'the pillars of the movement': 1) the auctions must be stopped; 2) farmers must be given extended credit, with five years of grace (and, according to the gravity of the situation, a decision should be made on forgiving the debt); 3) the National Bank must be defended against privatisation. In their public speeches, the leaders of the MMAL also make constant references to the need for opposition to the transfer of lands to foreign owners.

The pressure imposed by the MMAL over the banking system provoked the banks to extend payment deadlines and therefore stop the immediate threat of auctions between the late 1990s and the beginning of the 21st century.

The MMAL's actions have made the farmers' common economic situation visible, and have made it possible to create innovative and effective ways to improve it.

In a process as fast as the movement's expansion, the demands of the movement started to acquire an increasingly political content, exceeding their initial profile:

We started growing in such a way, with such a force, that they could not stop us. Because of all these efforts we could get a 20-year bond to pay our debts with the National Bank, where 14 million hectares of the best land in the country are under mortgage. So, we started to understand that they were coming not only for our lands but for the whole of Argentine sovereignty. And we were the ones who stopped the auctions of the lands of more than 400,000 small producers. The landowners wanted to go back to the beginning, to the era of the large land estates and the financial business, and this would mean the disappearance of the small farms. So, it took us some time to start understanding the situation, because we did not know anything about such things ...⁶

Although the movement's concrete achievements so far are limited, the social and political process of creating a solidarity network that connects the local with the national and global has been the main factor in the women's empowerment.

Mothers or fighters?

The MMAL represents the interests of small- and medium-scale farmers that work their own lands, but it is also defined as a women's movement. Its philosophy rests

6. Interview in the film *Los gritos del silencio*, by Norma Fernández.

on the traditional role of motherhood, but it does not specifically pursue strategic gender interests.

The distinctive feature in the MMAL's formation is its female character: facing economic bankruptcy and the decline in men's role as breadwinners, women organised themselves in order to do battle in defence of their families, their children and their homes.

The discourse of the organisation neither raises demands based on gender nor has a feminist character, however. On the contrary, its members reject this profile and emphasise their role as wives and mothers. Simultaneously, they stress their capacity to defend the family, the children and the home – a characteristic that they consider 'innate'. The MMAL has established points of reference related to traditional values, such as certain religious determinations that might be interpreted as conservative, as well as nationalistic conceptions. It regularly emphasises concepts like 'people', 'patriotism' and 'sovereignty'. However, it is necessary to acknowledge that, while its actions have been of clear practical benefit to women, the MMAL's discourse raises contradictions when it makes an evaluation of the role of women, their capacity for empowerment through networking and their ability to develop innovative strategies.

Questions for debate

This case study brings up several points for reflection:

- Why were the MMAL's members able to face the challenge of maintaining their farms and become important political actors, while at the same time remaining tied to traditional gender roles?
- How were they able to make the linkages between personal, local and global situations?
- What were the reasons for the creation of a movement exclusively made up of women?

- What was their relationship with the women's movement?
- In what way do neoliberal policies impact and reshape the public and private spheres and gender roles within them?

Methodology and references

This case study is based on secondary information consisting of studies and published investigations, MMAL documents and press articles relating to the movement. The work on the case study involved systematising the information, which was fragmented and dispersed. Because of its importance as background on the creation of the movement, the economic context of Argentine rural areas during the 1990s was elaborated in parallel.

References

Azcuy Ameghino, Eduardo (2001). 'El Movimiento de Mujeres en Lucha: hipótesis, problemas y propuestas de discusión'. Paper presented to *VIII Jornadas Inter-escuelas y/o Departamentos de Historia*, Salta, 19–22 September.

Barsky, Osvaldo (2003). 'El Censo del campo. Una foto nítida', *Clarín*, 9 April.

Bidaseca, Karina (2000). 'El Movimiento de Mujeres Agropecuarias en Lucha: cuando la vida cotidiana de las mujeres rurales se politiza'. Paper presented at *IV Jornadas de Investigadores de la Cultura*, Instituto Gino Germani, Facultad de Ciencias Sociales de la UBA, Buenos Aires.

Cornelis, Lucy and Galmarini, Ana (2001), *Publicación del Movimiento de Mujeres en Lucha* N° 4, Editorial MML, February.

*Giarracca, Norma, and Teubal, Miguel (1993). 'El día en que la Plaza de Mayo se vistió de campo', *Realidad Económica* N° 118, Buenos Aires.

*Giarracca, Norma, and Teubal, Miguel (1997). 'Las mujeres en la protesta rural en Argentina', *Realidad Económica* N° 150, Buenos Aires.

*Giarracca, Norma (1999): 'Cómo abordar y comprender los nuevos actores sociales de la protesta agraria de los años 1990. Un debate que recién comienza', *Realidad Económica* N° 167, Buenos Aires.

*Giarracca, Norma (2001). *La protesta social en la Argentina*. Buenos Aires: Ed. Alianza.

*Giarracca, Norma (2002). 'El 'Movimiento de Mujeres Agropecuarias en Lucha': protesta agraria y género durante el último lustro en Argentina', September. See www.clacso.edu.ar/~libros/rural/giarracca.pdf.

*Giarracca, Norma (2002). 'Argentina 1991–2001: Una década de protesta que finaliza en un comienzo. La mirada desde el interior del país', *Argumentos*, Buenos Aires, December.

*Lattuada, Mario (2001). 'El Movimiento Mujeres Agropecuarias en Lucha. Evolución institucional y profesionalización de nuevos actores reivindicativos en el agro argentino'. Proceedings of *II Jornadas Interdisciplinarias de Estudios Agrarios y Agroindustriales*, Facultad de Ciencias Económicas de la UBA, Buenos Aires.

***Newspapers:** *Ámbito Financiero, Clarín, El Litoral, La Arena, La Nación, La Tierra, Página/12*

***Film:** Norma Fernández, *Los gritos del silencio*, 2001.

***MMAL's brochures**