

A Collaborative Development Project for Peace: Assist Social Enterprise in Argentine Shantytown

Advisor: Prof. Antara Dutta

Elena Stewart, Vielka Hernandez

Objective

To help Mujeres Unidas en Accion (Women United in Action) in Villa 3, Buenos Aires, end violence against women in their community, we request \$10,000 to expand and renovate their women's shelter. The current building has one room, a dirt floor, and no electricity. It is too small to meet the demand for emergency housing or fit all of the members of Mujeres Unidas. With a larger, modern infrastructure, Mujeres Unidas will better administer social services, organize for collective action, and increase the productivity of their social enterprise. Computer and business training will enable Mujeres Unidas to effectively use their new technology to access information, resources, and opportunities to sell their handcrafts. They will also be able to keep in contact with the women's groups they meet at at regional, national, and international conferences, which will provide them with key allies in their struggle.

The project would have immediate and long-term positive outcomes. First, Mujeres Unidas would be able to save more lives and help transform more violent relationships. Second, the very process of construction would benefit its participants; the workers would be able to feed their families, and the youth apprentices would feel valued by their community and less inclined towards destructive behavior. Third, Mujeres Unidas would have the knowledge and technological access necessary to become more influential as political agents, and more prosperous as businesswomen. In the long term, this project would enable Mujeres Unidas to expand their work in Villa 3 and impact public policy. It would close gender and generational gaps, as women and men of different ages would work together as partners in a common cause. The young apprentices would have more hopeful prospects to find work, and the women's business would be able to reach out to more clients, which would generate more income. This income would improve their own lives, the lives of their families, and enable Mujeres Unidas to forge an equitable and peaceful community.

Background

In Villa 3, one of the poorest shantytowns of Buenos Aires, poverty and violence especially affect those most injured by social and economic inequality: immigrant women and children. As in the rest of Latin America, in Villa 3, the poorest of the poor households are those headed by women with children. These homes have the highest unemployment rate, work in the precarious and often dangerous informal sector, and earn the lowest wages.¹ In Villa 3, these women are especially vulnerable because they tend to be immigrants. They face linguistic barriers, social discrimination, and political and economic exclusion. Violence against women is widespread in Argentina, and worst in its slums. 25% of Argentine women are currently victims of gender violence, 50% will experience violence at least once in their lifetimes,² and the state of Buenos Aires, a woman is assassinated every three days.³ The problem is even worse in Villa 3. Gender-motivated violence is more common and severe, and there are fewer ways out of abusive relationships. In 80% of cases of violence against women in Argentina, the aggressor is a male partner or husband.⁴ In a city of 6 million women, there are 3 women's shelters.⁵ In Villa 3, poverty, violence against women, and lack of social support can be deadly.

I met the women of Mujeres Unidas while abroad last spring, through doing fieldwork in their community. Mujeres Unidas began ten years ago as an informal support group, where women neighbors helped each other transform and overcome violent relationships through group intervention. When local violence against women intensified during the 2001 economic crisis, they became nationally recognized activists. Their intervention strategy, in which they welcome victims of domestic violence into their homes, confront and warn the aggressor, alert the neighbors to his behavior to shame him, and, if he continues to behave violently, press charges, has become the model for the entire city. The government and outside groups regularly invite Mujeres Unidas to national and international conferences, such as the 2006 Encuentro Nacional de la Mujer. All of their actions, including social service, community health campaigns (22 of their members are government certified community health workers) and national advocacy for policy reform, they have carried out with no outside help, in response to the suffering they witness every day.

The Pan-American Health Organization's research shows that societies can be relatively free from domestic violence when there are supportive modes of community behavior and an active societal recognition of women. These include the empowerment of women outside the home, active community participation in addressing violence, solidarity and advocacy with other feminist groups, and sanctuaries from domestic violence.⁶ Our proposal includes all four recommendations.

1 Olga Viglicca, "From the Feminization of Poverty to Women's Political Leadership." <http://www.envio.org.ni/articulo/1626>

2 <http://www.ispm.org.ar/documentos/index.htm>

3 S. Ch. "Urgente proteccion: Victimas contra la violencia." <http://agendadelasmujeres.com.ar/index2.php?id=3¬a=2448>

4 "Informe de Avance de resultados." http://www.cnm.gov.ar/areainterv/inv_vio.htm

5 <http://www.rimaweb.com.ar/violencias/asistencia.html#caba>

6 http://www.paho.org/English/DPI/Number10_article2.htm

Enabling Mujeres en Acción⁹ to expand their business will increase productivity and the quality of life for the women involved and their families. Since producing knitted scarves and woven shawls for Georgetown's Alternative Gift Fair, the women decided to begin selling their goods in local fairs, but the profits are low. They want to penetrate the U.S. fair-trade handcraft market. To do so effectively, they need to be able to access and use the internet. The ILO found that microenterprises, globally, are the biggest source of new jobs, but that their growth is constrained by low skills levels and lack of technology. The ILO concluded that, "information and communications technology can significantly help microenterprises grow, be more productive and create more jobs in their communities."⁷ The benefits of the business's growth will impact entire families, as women are more likely than male heads of household to invest in their childrens' health, education, and nutrition.⁸ The World Bank (2001) notes that promoting gender equity is an important part of the movement to end poverty.⁹ Enabling Mujeres Unidas to supplement their incomes and work for social justice will help them to lift themselves out of poverty and construct a peaceful, healthy neighborhood for all.

Plan of Action

First, we'd hire five local skilled workers, and five unemployed young men as their apprentices to renovate their existing shelter. They would be paid at 12 and 6 pesos per hour, respectively, which is three times the current rate for construction workers. They would add two floors, two bathrooms, two bedrooms, a children's room, an office, and install electric wiring. The women would buy second-hand furniture (benches, shutters, four beds, and a desk). We would then install the computer, internet, and telephone. This first phase would take a month, during which time we'd initiate a community-based advocacy campaign.

Our community-based campaign, led by Mujeres Unidas, would generate awareness of domestic violence, and involve community members in identifying its causes and possible solutions. We'd arrange open dialogue sessions for women to talk freely about their experiences, and their hopes for change. One idea the women are enthusiastic about is a story telling project. In October, they began collecting each other's life stories; those who could, recorded them. They want their customers to know who they are and what kind of world they are trying to build. During the summer, we could help record their stories and transcribe them. Then, using the digital camera, we could set up a website to showcase their products to potential fair trade outlets, to describe the group's history and mission.

The third phase would be training, which we would carry out with the help of local volunteers. Vielka would teach business skills (she earned A's in Fundamentals of Finance and Principles of Accounting). She would ask her former professors (or their graduate students) for help to design a basic business course. Several friends of mine in Buenos Aires have volunteered their services to teach computer courses and help set up a website, such as Barbara Trzenko, a web designer and sociology student at the University of Buenos Aires.

During the fourth phase, we would help them to expand and formalize their business. We would set up a checking account (to facilitate financial transactions and increase the security of their resources) and use the internet to connect with potential clients (for example, OxFam, Ten Thousand Villages, and Pangea). We would also work with them to link to corporate donors, student groups and movements such as Students for Fair Trade, and even other women's cooperatives in Latin America. This would lay the groundwork and create the relationships that would strengthen their social enterprise after we leave Argentina.

Our Vision

This proposal is not our own. Its objectives and ideas come from the leaders of Mujeres Unidas, who are our friends, guides and *compañeras*. Rosa Ortega is a nationally recognized activist, Marcela Laforgia is a social worker, Liliana Lenguaza is a young mother, Natalia Delmonte is a lawyer, and Felicitas Nesi is a nun who has lived for years in Villa 3. Together, we elaborated the particular strategies to reach their goals of peace, justice, and prosperity through countless phone calls and emails. We are confident in our partnership.

Development research shows that collaborative projects, created, designed, and implemented by researchers and community organizations, are almost always more effective and sustainable than top-down projects.¹⁰ Because the nature of our collaboration reflects the end goal of equality and partnership, we believe that our project will have long-term, positive consequences for the people of Villa 3. By the end of July, we will have taught Mujeres Unidas how to access critical resources and economic opportunities, and given them the means to do so.

It is true that violence in the home mirrors and is influenced by violence in the streets. But it is also true that only by constructing peace within the fabric of daily life, the family, will the groundwork will be laid for

7 "World Employment Report 2004-2005: Employment, Productivity and Poverty Reduction" International Labor Organization, <http://www.ilo.org/public/english/employment/strat/wer2004.htm>

8 Olga Viglicca, "From the Feminization of Poverty to Women's Political Leadership." <http://www.envio.org.ni/articulo/1626>

9 Maria Elena Valenzuela, "Mujeres, Pobreza, y Mercado de Trabajo," International Labor Organization, p. 44. http://www.ilo.org/public/spanish/region/ampro/cinterfor/temas/gender/doc/cinter/pob_ap.pdf

10 Robert Chambers. *Whose Reality Count? : Putting the Last First*, 1997.