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Gender and Economic Crisis: Exploring Unemployment, Families and Pain in Buenos Aires

By Martha Farmelo

JANUARY 18, 2002

BUENOS AIRES, Argentina – Last month, Argentina exploded in protest against the current economic model and discredited politicians (see MJF-4 A Seizure or a Birth? Pots Clang, a President Falls and 30 Die as Argentines Say “Enough!”). Despite its abundant resources and legendary social and economic achievements, Argentina is in its fourth consecutive year of economic recession. This catastrophe has hurled men and women of several social strata into financial, personal and interpersonal crisis. This is the story of one family’s experience of under- and un-employment in Buenos Aires. Their names and some identifying details have been changed to protect their privacy.

Silvana is the wife of a friend of a friend. We were introduced during my first couple of weeks in Buenos Aires. A few short years ago she did graduate work in Michigan, and so assured me she understood all about the sometimes-overwhelming process of cross-cultural adaptation in which I am submerged. Because we hit it off and have many common interests, we decided to make a date for a coffee.

She suggested we meet in front of the Ateneo Gran Splendid bookstore-café on Avenida Santa Fe near the corner of Riobamba. I almost gasped when we walked inside. The Gran Splendid is an ornate old theater. The elaborate carvings along each of the three tiers that run the length of the U-shaped walls have been restored and repainted in white and gold. Those balconies are now corridors of neatly arranged book displays, and bookshelves also fill the area that used to be the orchestra section in pleasing diagonal rows. Soft, classical music is piped in, and the overall effect is both stunning and soothing.

We walked all the way to the back, to what used to be the stage and backstage area, which is now the café. The place was almost full, and while I was dying to sink into one of the luscious, cream-colored, overstuffed chairs, we took the last table with high stools way in the back. Silvana ordered a



Each of the photos in this newsletter was taken at the Ateneo Gran Splendid bookstore-café on Avenida Santa Fe at Riobamba.



cortado, an espresso with a shot of steamed milk, and I a *submarino*, a bar of unsweetened chocolate submerged in a tall mug of hot milk.

Silvana was anxious to hear more about my fellowship, my approach to gender issues and the types of topics I hoped to pursue. Among the dozen or so possibilities I outlined, I mentioned my interest in learning about the impact on marriages and families of escalating male unemployment and the concomitant increase of women in the workforce. I practically quoted from my fellowship application: “I’m anxious to know...*What impact is this having on the roles and relationships in those downwardly mobile middle-class families, on the frustrated, unemployed men and the often suddenly, newly employed women?*”

Little did I know I had just described her parents.

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After we had chatted for a bit, Silvana commented casually, “You should meet my parents one day. My father is an accountant. He’s been having trouble finding work.”

The waitress brought over our hot drinks, two little glasses of mineral water and a saucer with four tiny, round, chocolate cookies stuffed with *dulce de leche*, the super-sweet, Argentine version of caramel. Silvana ripped the ends off two packets of sugar and poured the contents into her white demitasse, while I stirred my chocolate bar ‘round and ‘round and ‘round with my long-handled, silver spoon.

Silvana went on. Her father, Martín, is 60. “He stud-

ied accounting but never graduated. Still, he had a successful career as a manager in a number of businesses, always in charge of a sizable staff,” she said.

Well over a year ago he was laid off. He found new work rather quickly, but nothing stable, only a series of jobs that lasted a few months each. Eventually, to stay employed, he had to settle for the type of work assigned to the lowest-level employees he used to supervise, at a third of his former salary—paid under the table, with zero benefits.

Silvana continued, “About a year ago, my mother went to work for the first time at age

58.” Victoria found work quite easily, though she’s stuck with utterly boring bookkeeping for a company that has numerous food concessions. She started out working 11 hours a day, then cut back to 8:00 to 5:00. “She earns a fraction of what my father did, but they desperately need the cash,” she said.

I sipped my *submarino*, found it needed sugar and dumped in two packets.

In Silvana’s words, “My mother was not happy. She told me that she and my father had a contract, that it was his responsibility to work and bring home the money, hers to take care of the kids and the home. She feels he broke their contract.” When he wasn’t employed she would often call him from work to ask if he had put in the laundry or cleaned up the house. Martín has taken on myriad domestic chores, but Victoria wishes she could do them herself.

Silvana picked up her coffee and drank half. She, her husband, Diego and four-year-old son Pablo, live in the same apartment building as her parents. As researchers and writers, she and Diego do most of their work at home. Silvana told me that during the last stretch of about a month when her father was unemployed, he would come over to her place during the day because he was lonely and wanted to talk.

“It was awful,” she said. “First of all, I couldn’t get any work done. But worse than that, he seemed really depressed and sometimes said he felt as though he wanted to kill himself. I didn’t know what to do. I was scared. I was upset.”

She took comfort in her understanding that people

who say they are going to kill themselves are not actually likely to try. "But it was terrible," she said. "After he would leave, I would have to get Diego to talk with me and help me calm down."

Things got tricky, too, when the person offering Martín work was none other than Silvana herself. "A few months ago, I asked him if he wanted to take Pablito to his pre-school in the morning and pick him up in the afternoon. We pay \$100 a month for a school-bus, and I thought that at least the money could go to my parents. They have a car, and it would get my father out of the house. He did it for a few weeks but he hated it. Imagine. He was humiliated." When it looked like he was about to start a new job, they signed up with the bus service again.

Silvana sighed, ate one of the little cookies and finished her coffee. I thought about her father's most recent jobs. "Doesn't he hate taking such lousy work at such low pay?" I asked.

"He's in much better spirits when he has work, no matter what it is, rather than being at home all day," she replied. He finally found another job but it was a short-term contract, and he will soon be unemployed again.

"This situation is just crazy," she said, "and so unexpected. I always felt that if we were caught in a pinch, I could call on my parents to help us out. Now I feel like I must work even harder so that I can help *them*." Her brother is a manager in a retail store and his wife is studying to be a kindergarten teacher. They have a baby daughter and are already helping out his wife's parents, since they are experiencing a similar crisis

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A week later Silvana called to invite me, my partner Alan, and our son Camilo, to join her family (minus her husband, Diego) for a day "in the country." They had agreed to spend six Saturdays at the home of friends in the upscale, northern suburb of Pilar, opening up the place and bringing in the mail during their absence. Camilo was sick so he and Alan stayed home, but I was hungry to get out of the city and eagerly accepted.

I took the bus to their apartment building near the federal courthouse but had to walk ten blocks because I became confused by streets with changing names and got off the bus too early. When I arrived, Silvana,

Martín, Victoria and Pablo were climbing into her parents' car, a small, white 1998 Renault that looked "zero kilometer," as Argentines call brand-new vehicles. Victoria looked much as I had imagined, though younger. Like her daughter, she is short and attractive with beautiful brown eyes and a smile that conveys her warmth, openness and generosity.

Martín threw me for a loop. I had conjured up the image of an introverted, slump-shouldered, heavy-set man with salt-and-pepper hair combed straight back and a thick, graying moustache. Instead, I found a short, sprightly, wiry man with thin gray hair and a long, narrow face. In his tennis whites he looked to be 60 going on 45. He has a lively sense of humor and smiles often. When I commented that it was a pity that this was the last Saturday they would be coming to such a beautiful spot, he countered, "No, no reason to be sad. We have to think how lucky we've been to have six weekends here."

Both Victoria and Martín are easy to talk to and I felt immediately at ease with them. They spoke with zeal about their vacations in Spain, Italy and New York. They also talked openly about their conviction that couples should plan their families. Martín explained that they had married young and waited three years before having their only other child, Silvana's brother. Victoria said, "Any couple can prevent a pregnancy. With the consciousness about AIDS these days, who doesn't know how to put on a condom?"

Martín teased his wife about her lousy sweeping and insisted on doing the job on the patio. At lunchtime he cooked pasta for his grandson and made a salad. He and Victoria both moaned about having to attend a birthday party at a snobby country club the next day. "On top of snobby, it's *machista*," said Martín. "Women are allowed



on the premises, but only men can be members or practice sports there."

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A few weeks later, Silvana and I went to the movies together. Afterward, over coffee, I told her that I was thinking of writing about her parents' story, that I had been hearing over and over again of similar situations and that it seemed to capture the impact of the Argentine crisis on countless middle-class families.

She agreed. I acknowledged the story's intimacy, and suggested that I could change their names to protect their privacy. I expressed interest in speaking with her parents about their experiences, but assured her that it was by no means necessary. "Let me think about it and talk to them," she said. "They may find it therapeutic to talk, or



they may not want to get into it at all." I trusted her judgment, and I waited.

A few days later, Silvana called to say that both of her parents had agreed to meet with me. "Just call them," she said. "They enjoyed spending time with you, and they're expecting your call."

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I called Martín first. "When would be good for you?" I asked.

"Well, I'm not working, so my calendar is pretty free," he replied.

I was actually immersed in writing another ICWA newsletter and would have preferred to wait several days, but squirmed at appearing to be so

busy. "How about tomorrow?," I asked.

"Sure," he replied. "Come on over."

Since I arrived a few minutes early, I stopped by Silvana's apartment to say hello. Only Diego was home.

We stood on their balcony looking out in the distance to the glistening Río de la Plata. "Martín is in a bad way," he told me. "Last week they called him from one of the places he worked before about a job that pays a bit better than what they paid him last time. They left it that the guy was just going to confirm with his son and call him back. For the last few days, they won't take his calls and they're not calling him back. He was over here this morning before Silvana left. He's pretty upset."

And, as we chatted, "You know, he's not a particularly introspective guy. In some ways this crisis has been good for him. He's much more involved with his family and grandchildren. But it's bad. It's been really hard."

* * * * *

Well, that did it for me. Call me a lousy reporter. I don't care. During my "interview" with Martín, I abandoned all the hard questions, especially the ones about feelings. Instead, as I sipped 7-Up while sitting across from him on the blue, brocade sofa in their luminous living room, Martín chronicled his career from his first, 14-year job as an accountant to his last three-month gig doing petty administrative tasks.

He spoke with special excitement about a few times over the last decade when he and his wife had considerable success with franchising. He pulled out photos of their most successful project: kiosks that sold accessories such as socks, sunglasses and hair barrettes in three shopping centers around Buenos Aires.

"We opened one of our kiosks just five days before Christmas. Each day there were so many people buying that you couldn't even see the stand." He was delighted when Victoria agreed to work with him, and they collaborated well. Their two children were grown, and he was pleased that she wanted to become active outside their home.

"Having my own business was my dream, and we did it," he said. "That's why we're so sad and frustrated. We know we can do it, we did it well, and we liked it."

When he spoke of the down times, even the lousy

jobs sounded good. He leaned forward and smiled. "Even when I was picking up cash register records from food concessions at the airport, I enjoyed myself," he said. "Especially because of my work in franchising, I've become much more extroverted. I enjoyed being in contact with so many people again. Even though I never said anything about myself, they all called me *el Contador*— the accountant." He didn't mention anything about the pay reduction. "Did they pay decently?" I asked without looking directly at him. "No," he replied with unwavering poise. "They paid me far less than I used to make, but I didn't have much choice."



He leaned back and crossed his legs and arms. "Now, though, it's getting tough. Even during the recession, whenever I needed to work, I would call around and be working within a week at the most. Whenever a job ended, I always left on the best of terms and never burned any bridges. Now I'm 60. I can't go out and apply for a job. No one, and I mean *no one*, would hire me. The only thing I can do is call on my colleagues and friends. They hire me because they know my work. But it's going to be hard if the economy doesn't pick up."

As he spoke, I thought about how I would feel if I

were out of work (and without a fellowship) for more than a few weeks. The result was a sickening sensation in my stomach and chest. I love to work. I *need* to work. I could only imagine what that sensation must be like for a 60-something male, especially in still-*machista* Argentina. I also couldn't help wondering what it would be like if my father, an attorney now in his early 70s, had been unemployed and my mother had been forced to work. It was almost impossible to visualize.

Later, still trying to put myself in Martín's shoes, I realized that I am proud. I imagined feeling intense irritation if someone many years my junior asked me such questions.



At about 5:15 Victoria came home with some pastries and went right to work making coffee for us. She laid out a lace cloth on the coffee table that separated us and pulled out flowered china demitasse cups and tiny, silver spoons. Before I left, we made a date to have coffee the following week at 5:00 at El Ateneo Gran Splendid, which is down the street from her job.

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I was looking forward to my meeting with Victoria. After our Saturday in Pilar, I felt as if I could call her any time I needed a shoulder to lean on in Buenos Aires. "This encounter will be woman-to-woman, so now we'll really talk," I thought.

The day of our meeting, Victoria called to change our appointment from 5:00 to 3:00. This time I got a comfortable, cream-colored chair. When we sat down, she explained.

"Today I got out early because there was so little work to do. The company is losing clients. I started out at a thousand dollars a month. After a while they cut my pay to eight hundred dollars. What could I do? I needed the work. They know my work is good. Like so many others in this country, they pay me under the table—no benefits, no nothing. I'm sure

they're filling their pockets. I know they're losing business, but still... Today they offered to keep me on at two hundred dollars a month. Two hundred dollars a month! It was an insult. I told them so."

Others have accepted such offers because they have no choice. She sat up a bit straighter, adjusted her hair and went on. "This is the same place that contracted Martín to work at the airports, so they know he is out of work. "Tell Martín not to get depressed," my boss told me. "My husband does not get depressed, so you do not need to worry," I told him.

I smiled faintly, and she smiled back. I asked if she felt angry at Martín at all, and commented that it seemed natural to me that she would. When she didn't react at all, I backpedaled, "you know, or maybe not angry, but frustrated about it all."

She told me that yes, she's frustrated with the politicians and economists, but not angry at Martín. "How can I be angry at him if it's not his fault?," she said.

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When I spoke to Silvana in late November, 2001, both of her parents were still looking for work, and they were spending down their savings. She said her father was quite worried, but her mother was feeling optimistic. That was just days before the government announced a package of measures on December 1, 2001, that seemed to escalate the crisis. The announcement also unleashed ubiquitous looting and massive, spontaneous, pot-banging protests that expressed Argentines' anger, hunger and desperation.

The key measure—in the midst of the worst run on deposits in recent history—was a \$250 limit per week on cash bank withdrawals, known as *el corralito* (little corral or playpen). In essence, the government has frozen Argentines' peso and dollar accounts. Although *el corralito* has been loosened slightly, people fear they may never see that money again.

Just as the new measures were announced, one new friend of mine returned from a week-long vacation with her husband and daughter at the beach in Brazil. "If we had planned this for January, we'd be canceling like everyone else," she told me on the phone. She stayed home from work that day with an upset stomach and back problems. She explained, "I know myself. I think this illness is stress. Damn

them! Is there any solution to all this?"

On December 6, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) announced its decision against sending a long- and desperately-awaited \$1.26 billion loan disbursement to Argentina, putting a big stick in the spokes of the government's last-ditch economic program. Within two weeks, scattered shoplifting and manifestations escalated into a full-scale explosion of looting and protests that left 30 dead and forced the resignations of Economy Minister Domingo Cavallo and President Fernando de la Rúa.

On Christmas eve, seven-day Peronist President Adolfo Rodríguez Saá assumed office and immediately declared official default on all of Argentina's foreign debt. He abruptly resigned following a massive protest against continuing bank restrictions and corrupt cabinet appointees, and after only five of 14 Peronist governors agreed to meet with him. On January 2, the Presidency was assumed by Peronist Senator Eduardo Duhalde, former Vice President under Carlos Saúl Menem (now his arch-rival) and governor of Buenos Aires province.

Within days, Duhalde announced the devaluation of the Argentine peso, putting an end to almost 11 years of popular, once-stabilizing dollar-peso parity. While this historic measure favors Argentine exports, in the best-case scenario, economic reactivation will take at least a couple of years—and will require new policies beyond just devaluation. Both the government and the IMF are projecting zero growth in 2002—which is better than negative growth, but still ominous news. Meanwhile, the devaluation has only increased the chaos, confusion and angst around *el corralito*, which



changes slightly every few days.

As Argentina enters its 41st month of economic recession, official unemployment is nearly 20 percent and underemployment another 20 percent on top of that. According to the centrist daily *Clarín*, over the last two years, 1,000 Argentines per day have become newly unemployed, and the numbers are getting worse. The government recently announced that people with university or professional training are the fastest growing unemployed group. In the Buenos Aires metropolitan area, 21,000 professionals became jobless in the last 12 months alone—that's 57 a day—bringing the total number of jobless professionals to 61,000.

The common wisdom I'm hearing day after day is that once you lose your job, that's it. No one has much hope of finding new employment. More and more, men and women are scrambling, not to work but to survive joblessness.

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La Nación and *Página/12* both ran stories last month describing the increase in panic attacks, high blood pressure and ulcers, and the rise in the consumption of antidepressants and anti-anxiety medications. One leader of the Association of Argentine Psychiatrists estimates that the number of visits to him and his colleagues increased 300 percent in the first week of December after the new measures were announced. Another group, Psychologists and Psychiatrists of Buenos Aires, says that a study of 2,841 therapy sessions in the last two years revealed that more than half were related to lack of work, economic worries, decreased income and the associated deterioration in the quality of life.

On Christmas eve, as the temperature rose into the 80's and we decorated our little tree, I caught myself heaving a sigh as I pondered the concept of underemployment, defined as part-time employment (even one hour a week) for those who seek full-time work. The term also seems apt for those who work full-time or more but haven't been paid for months, those who work far below their skill level for a fraction of what they're worth, or those who do bookkeeping 55 hours a week for \$800 a month—that's less than \$3.60 an hour—or much, much less. I also wondered what the holidays would be like for Martín, Victoria and their family.

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On January 6, Silvana and Diego moved to Ann Arbor, Michigan, where they plan to wrap up unfinished doctorates and look for work that will allow them to help their families. I was heartbroken to say goodbye to someone to whom I felt so connected.

One week later, reflecting the banking system's fragility, President Duhalde announced that *el corralito* is a



time bomb, and if it explodes, no Argentine will recover a single peso. I think all of Argentina is a time bomb. Violence and protest continue to mount across the country.

This week, banks and ATMs were burned in the provinces of Jujuy, Santa Fe and Buenos Aires and confrontations with police left several dozen wounded and detained. In Córdoba, doctors, patients and neighbors took over 25 health clinics to protest the dangerous lack of medicines and call for better services. In front of town halls across the country, municipal employees demanded payment of government salaries unpaid for months, and unemployed men and women clamored for jobs and food. In La Quiaca, Argentina's northernmost city, jobless men "crucified" themselves by tying their arms and legs to crosses and the municipality was destroyed completely.

In Buenos Aires, outside the presidential residence, real-estate agents demanded a solution to their crisis—I heard on TV that not one home has been sold in Buenos Aires so far this year. In front of the national courthouse, thousands of pot-banging Argentines' denounced judicial corruption and called for the Supreme Court's resignation. Yesterday thousands of outraged citizens marched from the Congress to the Plaza de Mayo. Their purpose was to commemorate the 30 Argentines who died one month ago during the looting and protests, and to clamor that justice be applied to the repression's intellectual and material perpetrators.

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Last night, Martín called me to say that he and Victoria are moving to Spain — for good — in six short weeks. Silvana had not let me know. I didn't know what to say to him.

Although visa-seeking Argentines have been lining up at the Spanish, Italian and US embassies for months, it never occurred to me to ask them if they might leave. In retrospect, it seems like an obvious question. I'm learning to ask all my new friends if they are thinking of leaving the country. Very few say they haven't thought of it.

Taking advantage of Victoria's Spanish citizenship (she migrated to Buenos Aires as a young child), they

plan to relocate in the coastal city of Vigo, Galicia, where they have a distant cousin. In preparation, they hope to sell their car, apartment and most of their possessions. I confess I felt a moment of perverse excitement about getting a great deal on a TV and VCR to replace the loaners we have to return.

“So, how are you feeling about this?” I asked Martín. “Do you want to go?”

“Actually, we do not want to leave the country. We’re really only going because we don’t have another choice. I’ve been out of work for five months and Victoria for four, and we’ve called every friend and acquaintance we can possibly think of. Perhaps we could find work if the economy improves, but even if it does, it’s going to take at least two or three years to see progress. We can’t wait that long. And I can’t continue to stay here looking at the moon” [the equivalent of twiddling one’s thumbs].

I was so stunned by his news that I was unable to read or write, so after tidying our apartment I finally went to bed. As I lay awake in the dark, I mulled over all that this means for Martín and Victoria, for Silvana, Diego and Pablo, for their entire family.

Having just made an international move myself, my mind raced as I visualized this 60-year-old couple selling or giving away their flowered demitasse cups and silver spoons, sweeping up their empty apartment, arriving at the airport with humongous suitcases and later sitting on the plane together. I also tried to imagine them, map-in-hand, looking for a place to live in Vigo, job hunting, scrambling to find the cheapest long-distance phone rates, picking out new plates and juice glasses, or inviting new friends over for dinner for the first time.

Today Victoria called to give me prices on some things they are trying to sell. I also inquired about how she’s feeling about the move.

“I feel better now that we have a project,” she said. “I couldn’t stand doing nothing. We hear there’s work in Vigo, and after a month, if I haven’t found a job, at least I will qualify for unemployment assistance. We’ll be far more protected there than here. It means leaving behind my mother, my sister, my son and his wife—and my granddaughter. But my son says that if things go well for us there, maybe they’ll come join us.”

I’m dreading going to pick up that TV set.

In March, one of Alan’s brothers is moving from the Patagonian city of Río Gallegos to Tucson, Arizona with his wife and our two nieces. Next month the family of one of Camilo’s pre-school friends is leaving Buenos Aires to move to Barcelona, Spain. This afternoon I sat with about 25 women in a shanty-town just a few miles from my apartment. They startled me with their talk of relatives who have migrated to Canada and the US.

I am haunted by a comment made to us during one of our first weeks in Buenos Aires, quoted in my first newsletter.

“As we drank coffee in her cluttered office, the director of one pre-school we visited seemed excited about our arrival. ‘Sometimes you get the feeling there aren’t going to be many of us left, and we’re going to be all alone,’ she said smiling, then looking down.”

It’s hard to imagine that emigration could possibly make a dent in the way that Buenos Aires bustles with people, but I echo her sense of feeling alone. □

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