

## NATIONAL CONFERENCES OF WOMEN: A CRITICAL VISION

By Patricia Barrio<sup>1</sup>

### **Beginning of the conferences and their evolution**

The National Women's Conferences, commonly known as the "meeting of the Self-Called"<sup>2</sup> in Argentina, must be placed in historical perspective. These conferences relate to the political agenda of the United Nations and the expansion of feminism. In 1975, the first World Conference on Women was inaugurated in Mexico City. This conference was followed by another one in Copenhagen (Denmark) in 1980, and the third one was in Nairobi, capital of Kenya, in 1985<sup>3</sup>. This last meeting was very important because it exposed the situation of indigence and marginalization of thousands of women, especially in the African continent. In this meeting there were proposals to benefit women.

The Nairobi conference was attended by 43 Argentine women and, upon their return home, they decided to organize what is known as "Women's Conferences". The first was held in 1986 in Buenos Aires, the capital of Argentina, with the presence of around 600 women. That meeting has been followed by 32 more, that is, one per year. These meetings, throughout the years, have consolidated a solid structure that consists in a three-day agenda, with three fundamental events: workshops, moment of closure and conclusions, and final march.

### **Purpose of the Conferences**

Regarding the workshops, the first meetings dealt with topics such as: Woman and Identity, Woman and Family, Women and Work, Women and the Media, Women and Free Time, Women and Trade Unionism, Women and the Elderly, Women and Health. However, over the years, and due to social and political influences, the topics have

---

<sup>1</sup> Patricia Barrio de Villanueva is a professor and graduated in History, Magister in History of Argentine Political Ideas and has a Doctorate in History by the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters of the National University of Cuyo (Mendoza, Argentina). She is a principal professional at CONICET, specializing in regional economic history and the history of Argentine political ideas, and is the author of scientific articles and books. She also directs doctoral research and thesis projects.

<sup>2</sup> Official page of the National Women's Meetings, available at: <http://encuentrodemujeres.com.ar/historia-del-encuentro/>.

<sup>3</sup> Article available at: <http://encuentrodemujeres.com.ar/historia-del-encuentro/>.

changed. Now we find topics such as: women sex workers, women and lesbian activism, women and access to abortion<sup>4</sup>. This reality responds to the fact that the central purpose of the meetings is to give rise to conclusions, which are then expressed as proposals that, according to their participants, should be implemented in Argentina as public policy. They seek to generate political pressure<sup>5</sup>.

### **Mechanism and Structure of the Workshops and Meetings**

The mechanism of the workshops consists of forming groups of no more than 40 women who, in accordance with the subject of the workshop, talk about their experiences, discuss the issues at hand, and make proposals during the weekend. Each of these workshops ends with a document that contains the main positions and proposals of the participants, without expressing if the opinion represents the majority or the minority of the participants. The next day, all the conclusions are read in a public place. When reading these conclusions, it is noticeable that the accent of these meetings is placed on the alleged "expression" of all women's voices<sup>6</sup>, but without really caring about the opinions of the whole group. In addition, these conclusions do not go further than just these women's opinions and experiences without implying any way out of the realm of the experiential or opinion, certainly not based on statistics or other sociological studies, medical or legal information, or the like.

### **Current reality of the meetings**

The first meetings were organized by "progressive" women, who extolled democracy – referring to the dictatorship lived in Argentina between 1976 and 1983– - and called for greater participation of women in politics<sup>7</sup>. But over time, Leftist political parties and a very active minority of an anti-system Left joined to this "progressive" women

---

<sup>4</sup> Article available at: <http://encuentrodemujeres.com.ar/talleres/listado-de-los-73-talleres/>.

<sup>5</sup> Mariela Isabel Herrera "Notes to interpret the growth of the National Encounters of Women in the collective struggles in Argentina." Article available at: <http://www.pcient.uner.edu.ar/index.php/utopias/article/download/372/292>.

<sup>6</sup> We refer to the as 'so called expression' because in these meetings women of many opinions participate and the diversity of them is not reflected in the conclusions.

<sup>7</sup> Barrancos, Dora. "The paths of feminism in Argentina: history and drifts". In Voices in the Phoenix. This site has numerous contributions from leading Argentine feminists. Recovered from: <http://www.vocesenelfenix.com/content/los-caminos-del-feminismo-en-la-argentina-historia-y-derivadas> (October 20th, 2018).

movement. This situation generated two typical problems associated with strong intolerance. On one side, there were conflicts between these groups. On the other, the problem was the rejection of the participation of women identified with traditional political parties, belonging to Christian churches, or simply independent women<sup>8</sup>. If the encounters had made clear that they ascribed to the ideological current of feminism, women who do not identify with that ideology would not have participated. But in each of these "Autoconvocados" (Self-called) Meetings they repeated that the conclusions of the workshops represented the opinion, values and feelings of all Argentine women. Therefore, it is unfair not to include in the final document all the opinions of all female voices.

Another factor that operated due to the intolerance manifested in these meetings was the incorporation of topics such as sexual education for children and young people with a gender perspective, the concept of gender and abortion as a right. This change of perspective began from 1995 when at the Fourth World Conference of the United Nations, held in Beijing, the final documents (Declaration and Plan of Action)<sup>9</sup> promoted the gender and abortion agenda to member countries of the international organization.

The Beijing Conference has been very influential. In its aftermath, at the Self-Called Conferences ("Autoconvocadas") women focused on its conclusions, and exerted strong political pressure with it, to the point that in 2002 the Argentine Congress voted the Sexual Health Law and Responsible Procreation that gives free access to contraceptive methods to those who request it<sup>10</sup>.

---

<sup>8</sup> In the words of Mariela Isabel Herrera in Article "Notes to interpret the growth of the National Meetings of Women in the collective struggles in Argentina": *The conflictive relationship that will establish the anti-abortion Catholic women with "pro-choice" women will take as a strategy to invoke both the condition of women as well as the "democratic" character of the Encounters. Like a boomerang, the reactionary strategy is successful and demands enormous efforts every year from the organizers, coordinators and workshops to organize the debate; and resist and channel the harassment of these women who call themselves "pro-life."* Article available at: <http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:AFQIFFNOGI4J:www.pcient.uner.edu.ar/index.php/utopias/article/download/372/292+&cd=1&hl=es-419&ct=clnk&gl=ar>.

<sup>9</sup> UN Women *Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action*. Recovered from: <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/pdf/BDPfA%20S.pdf> (October 15<sup>th</sup>, 2018).

<sup>10</sup> Article available at: <http://centrodebioetica.org/2009/11/politicas-publicas-y-familia-la-cuestion-de-la-salud-reproductiva/>.

The following year, during the XVIII Meeting of Self-Called Women, in the city of Rosario, an assembly was held asking for the approval of a law that would legalize abortion; and from then on, the main objective of the conference has been to work on this topic to have a tool that allows them to exert pressure in the National Congress<sup>11</sup>. That goal has taken root in the organization, to the point that ever since 2005, there are numerous testimonies of intolerance in the abortion workshop, when women who defend life from conception as the first human right have given their opinion and asked for it to be included in the final conclusions. There have been cases of women being pushed out of schools where the workshops are held. Finally, on Sunday, the last day of the meetings, when the workshops have been completed, a march is held and some groups go to the cathedrals of the city where the meeting has taken place to set it on fire, perform acts of profanation, undressing, etc. They have also painted walls, broken glass and cars, and even destroyed nearby shops. I invite those concerned to see footage of these acts online<sup>12</sup>. The testimonies are many<sup>13</sup>.

What is also troubling is that they have governmental support. The province where these mass meetings are held usually declare it of "cultural interest", which is why the schools are opened and funds are allocated for the transfer, lodging and meals of around 20,000 women from different parts of the country. They do this even when they know that the city is going to be covered in graffiti and that public and private property will be destroyed.

In 2018, for example, according to press reports, Argentine President Mauricio Macri allocated 6 million pesos (around 164,000 US dollars)<sup>14</sup> to transfer women to Trelew in the south of Argentina, in the middle of an economic and social crisis of enormous magnitude. Also, and despite the rejection of the abortion law debated in August 2018,

---

<sup>11</sup> Article available at: <http://panyrosas.org.ar/Mil-mujeres-de-Pan-y-Rosas-junto-a-legisladoras-del-PTS-en-el-FIT-en-Encuentro-Nacional-de-Mujeres>.

<sup>12</sup> Video available at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eshgflcmow0> , [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nQi-1\\_viiXk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nQi-1_viiXk).

<sup>13</sup> Video available at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NrVpWZmX2U4> ,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FSy1G7z15DU>.

<sup>14</sup> In: 'Noticias' journal, the Argentine digital newspaper, October 17, 2018. Recovered from:

<https://diarionoticias.com.ar/politica/item/7005>.

an operation has begun from the national government and spread to the provinces to give sex education classes starting at the age of five with a gender perspective that denies human nature, the sexual difference between men and women, and promotes all kinds of promiscuous sexual behavior<sup>15</sup>.

## **Conclusions**

While we cannot deny that certain impulses to defend the true and legitimate rights of women have been incorporated by the structure of the “National Women’s Conferences , it is also true to say that today is an exclusive and excluding tool of pressure from the extremist feminists groups, Leftist parties and LGTBI movements.

---

<sup>15</sup> Available at: <https://www.argentina.gob.ar/sites/default/files/eje-reconocer-la-perspectiva-de-genero.pdf> also see: <http://www.mendoza.edu.ar/esi-home/>.