Voluntas, 7:4, 336-349

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Women and philanthropy in Argentina: from the society of beneficence to Eva Perón

Abstract

This article focuses on the history of voluntary associations in Argentina over the past 200 years. Argentine voluntary associations have their roots in the alliance of the Catholic church, the state and the country’s elites, in which women played major roles. The charitable stage can be divided into two phases: the first (1600-1899) was encouraged mainly by the church, in particular through the Sisters of Charity; the second (1820-1940) took shape under state patronage in a period of centralisation and secularisation. The Society of Beneficence, a quasi-public institution run by wealthy women, emerged as the most important institution for public assistance until the formation of the Eva Perón Foundation, which became the paradigmatic form of social assistance in the 1940s. Nevertheless, the approach adopted by the Foundation differed very little from those of its precursors. Within this framework the current social development model attempts to reconfigure the relationships between the public institutions and civil society.

Introduction

Throughout the world, the relationship between voluntary organisations and government is a key to understanding the dynamics of state and society. Argentina is no exception, providing a case study that contributes to broader debates about the emergence and functions of the voluntary sector and the historical role of particular groups such as women in shaping these activities. Charity, social assistance, social welfare provision and social development in Argentina form the four conceptual models of government/third sector relationships. All share the common goal of improving and controlling the living conditions among lower-income groups, through a wide-ranging and sometimes
confused series of prevention, promotion and social assistance programmes. This article examines the first three of these models.2

- The charitable model can be divided into two distinct phases. The first was encouraged mainly by the church (1600-1820) through its congregations, and the second by the state (1820-1940) through private philanthropic associations.
- The social welfare model has never fully evolved in spite of different civil and governmental efforts to develop it.
- The social assistance model, developed since the beginning of the century, combined the action of mutual benefit associations with a concentration of resources and policies by the state, especially under Perón’s populist welfare state between 1946 and 1955.

The charitable model: religion, women and state

The lines between private and public activities were often blurred because the colonial state had to confront the church, faced with a difficult and sometimes chaotic administration of former religious institutions. The association between the church, the colonial state and the elites was at the core of all the charitable and philanthropic institutions that developed in Argentina over the course of almost three centuries. Colonial elites involved themselves in these activities by providing funds and lands, as well as moral and political support and personal engagement.

The Sisters of Charity was founded in 1727 by Don Juan Alonso Gonzalez. Its members were leading activists during the colonial period, combining religious evangelisation and social assistance; they received both the economic support of the church and private donations from the upper classes. The Sisters of Charity developed a rationale for social service based on moral precepts, assuming active roles as nurses and social workers. At that time, most women worked in the domestic sphere. Religious ideals were the only accepted arguments which allowed women to participate in the public world. Many women entered religious orders as preferable to agreeing to an arranged marriage or remaining in their original family.

The Revolution of May in 1810 resulted in Argentinean independence and inaugurated a progressive transference of religious institutions to ‘lay’ organisations under state control. Bernardino Rivadavia (first minister of Martin Rodriguez’s Presidency) was the main promoter of this secularisation. By the middle of the nineteenth century, state intervention had grown progressively, involving both centralisation and secularisation. By 1820 the church had lost most of its public