INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF COMMUNITY CURRENCY RESEARCH

Vol 11 (2007) pp. 98 - 111
ISSN 1325-9547

EXPLORING GENDER DIVISIONS IN A COMMUNITY CURRENCY SCHEME: THE CASE OF THE BARTER NETWORK IN ARGENTINA

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to explore the ways in which Community Currency Schemes (CCS), as markets, are permeated by other influential social orders, in this case that of gender. The paper therefore looks at the way in which gender structures may be reproduced or reflected in these kinds of markets and how they sometimes acquire certain features depending on the CCS in question. The paper is based on a particular case study, the Argentine experience with a CCS - known as the 'Barter Network' - and is structured around three main issues. The first analytical section deals with a characteristic of the Barter Network shared by many other CCS: the preponderance of female (or the scarcity of male) participants. Thus, the reasons for the gender composition of the Barter Network are examined. The second section explores the way in which, through its development, this CCS generated its own gendered structures. Hence, the dynamics of certain trade practices which imply differential returns for men and women are examined. Finally, the article considers the degree of empowerment that participation in this sphere may have implied for female participants.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This article is an extract from my Doctoral Dissertation at the University of Essex's Sociology Department. The fieldwork of this research was conducted thanks to the financial support of the Sociology Department's Small Graduate Fund.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this article is to expose the way in which a CCS, as a market, is permeated by other social institutions, in this case, gender. More specifically the aim is to provide an insight into the way gender divisions may sometimes be reproduced or reflected in a CCS and how they may acquire certain features depending on the CCS in question. In order to do this, the paper bases its analysis on a particular case study: the Argentinean Barter Network.

Therefore, the first section of the paper introduces the characteristics and evolution of the Barter Network in the context of Argentina's recent social and economic changes. The second section briefly exposes the methodological approach employed for the collection of the data depicted in the article. The third section contains an analysis of the information and is structured around three main issues. Firstly, given the preponderance of female participants in the Barter Network – something which, as pointed out by Seyfang (2001), is a common situation in CCS - the factors determining this predominance are analyzed. Secondly, the article explores the ways in which gender inequalities were present in the Barter Network and the particular forms they took on. Finally, the paper concludes by considering the degree of empowerment that participation in this Scheme may have implied for women.

THE ARGENTINIAN BARTER NETWORK IN CONTEXT

The Barter Network emerged in Argentina amidst the country's economic recession by the mid-1990's. It was in this decade that the country – as a result of the application of an abrupt programme of neo-liberal reforms - experienced a dramatic production dismantling process, with unprecedented rates of unemployment and growing social polarisation.

The Barter Network was born in this context, aiming to construct a space of inter-household collaboration to alleviate economic distress and promote fair trade practices, as well as ecological sustainability (De Sanzo *et al*., 1998). This Community Currency Scheme (CCS) consisted of a series of markets or fairs where people gathered weekly to exchange goods and services using paper money issued by the movement (known as *credits*). These fairs sprung up in all sorts of public spaces (such as schools, churches, social clubs, etc.), with each market led by a coordinator or group of coordinators.

Originally, the typical participant profile was that of an impoverished middle class member who - while adhering to the movement's ideological commitments - found an alternative for household provision in the face of increasing unemployment rates (González Bombal, 2002). At the early stage of the movement (1995-1998), fairs consisted of small groups of traders acquainted with each other who exchanged what initially were goods such as baked products, handmade clothes and handicrafts, among others. A wide range of personal services were available, as well. Lawyers, plumbers, psychologists or masseuses, just to name a few, were among the many workers who found in this space an alternative way to market their services.

As the economic situation worsened, the movement's leaders heavily promoted the system throughout the country, this time attracting both a larger number of impoverished middle class sectors as well as long-term poor population. The cycle of profound economic recession was to deepen even further until, in December 2001, it finally imploded in the form of a severe financial, social and political crisis, which ended with a president's resignation and several riot-related casualties. The following months were economically harsh ones, and more and more people found a refuge in the Barter Network.

Therefore, with members joining massively, the initiative became one of the largest Community Schemes worldwide: towards 2002, it encompassed nearly 2.5 million participants (Ovalles, 2002). At this stage, the fairs' landscape changed drastically: from small neighbours' gatherings to crowded, thriving marketplaces. The offers in these markets also changed, as participants – aside from small-scale production and services - tended to engage in the practice of reselling items bought in the mainstream market (mostly staples) as well as second-hand goods (i.e., household appliances, furniture, clothes, etc.). Also, many shop owners – faced with a profound economic crisis - joined in order to sell part of their merchandise.

The years from 1999 to mid-2002 constitute thus the 'peak' of this alternative market both in terms of participation and circulating wealth. However, it must be noted that the system proved itself unprepared to frame its own growth, and thus, many problems developed that led to the movement's near-collapse.

Limitations of space do not allow for a detailed account of the problems that provoked the crisis of the Barter Network, however some of the main issues at stake should be mentioned. The question of how to regulate a market which experienced such an abrupt growth certainly brought about tensions within the movement. This led to an internal rift between those who pushed for a decentralisation of the system, democratic decision-making processes and the participation of members in the issuance of regional credits and those who proposed homogenising and centralising the Network's administration with a single national currency (see North, 2007; Powell, 2002 and Hintze, 2003).

As the latter faction prevailed, the incapacity to regulate this growing market soon became evident via a myriad of problems. The over-issuance of the movement's money; the massive selling of forged credits by organised groups; an evident bottleneck of staples which were not produced within the system (and which were highly demanded by participants); accusations of corrupt practices directed at many leaders and coordinators; infiltration by local politicians into the fairs' management, etc., were all factors that led to a crisis of confidence in the system and to a hyperinflationary process by the end of 2002 (see North, 2007 and Hintze, 2003).

As the Barter Network experienced its crisis, the country entered into a period of political and economic stabilisation. The new government abandoned neo-liberal precepts and implemented a soft-protectionist policy which, since the end of 2002, has propelled an incipient but sustained economic recovery. This more favourable context only served to reinforce members' withdrawal from an extremely weakened Barter Network. The movement was thus left with a considerable decrease in terms of both participants as well as goods/services available, a situation from which it has not recovered.

METHODOLOGY

This article is based on data collected from July to December 2003 as part of a Doctoral Dissertation. The information was gathered mainly through in-depth interviews with participants, ex-participants, coordinators and ex-coordinators of the fairs[1]. Participant observation in the markets was also deployed in order to complement information from the interviews. Most of the data was collected in Argentina's capital city – Buenos Aires – and its outskirts[2].

Forty interviews were conducted, 12 with coordinators and 28 with regular participants. For each category (coordinators and participants), equal numbers of men and women were interviewed[3].

Most of the testimonies depicted in this article are retrospective and refer to participation at the 'peak' of the movement (from 1999 to mid-2002)[4]. The basis for this decision is that this was the period when participation was more intense and interaction in the movement between men and women more dynamic. There are however, some occasional quotations (indicated where necessary) which refer to the post-crisis stage (2003), when the fieldwork was conducted. Whereas some of these latter testimonies reinforce certain gendered patterns of participation observed at the peak stage, some others establish differences related to the changes experienced by the system.

GENDER DIVISIONS IN THE BARTER NETWORK

Analyzing Female Preponderance

As has been stated previously, the Barter Network – like many other CCS - was predominantly a women's realm. The movement's peak, which coincided with skyrocketing unemployment rates, was the period when more men approached the system, although women still remained a majority.

The preponderance of women seems to relate to two factors. On the one hand, this preponderance is deeply related to the gendered order of work that establishes that men are the main persons responsible for breadwinning, while women's priorities tend to be associated with the domestic sphere. Even when, in the last decades, Argentinean women have systematically increased their participation in the labour market (Cortés, 2003), such participation seems to have followed the pattern pointed out by Gónzalez de la Rocha (2000). This author argues that, in a context of economic crisis, households mobilise a multiplicity of resources in order to survive: among these resources, the putting to work of members who were formerly inactive is generally the first strategy deployed. The strategy of the 'additional worker' (Beccaria and López, 1994), has been extensively used in Argentina. And these additional workers driven into the labour market were, first off, women who were formerly housewives. However, women's work has been heavily conditioned by the possibility of combining their paid work with domestic responsibilities. In this sense, participation in the labour market has been subject to the possibility of 'fitting it all in' (Jordan, *et al.*, 1992), often leading to more part-time and more flexible forms of work in general.

Indeed, half of the women interviewed for this study exhibited this type of work trajectory, this is, a history part-time – usually self-employed and informal - work. Housewives also had a significant weight, accounting for a quarter of interviewees. The remaining quarter were

women with a history of full-time work – although generally unemployed while participating in the Network[5].

This situation may help to explain why women may have joined the system more extensively than did men: they had more flexible schedules (as they tend to have fewer hours of paid work) as well as more permeable attitudes in relation to this new kind of labour (as they tended to perceive themselves as secondary earners).

In this sense, even when many women were accounting for a significant part of the household budget with their activities in the Barter Network most of them acknowledged this situation as one in which they were 'helping out' or 'lending a hand' to their partners:

> 'Yes, it was good to be able to help my husband. In times of hardship that's what partners are for, don't you think so? While he was looking for a job, I was obtaining everything we needed for the house, so we survived thanks to the Network. Now (she refers to the system's post-crisis stage) I keep on coming because I like it and because it's still a little help that I can provide' (Esther F., participant).

> 'I used to work in a workshop, sewing. After losing that job I was going to the Network all the time, I took it as a job. I think I was helping my husband a lot and that made me feel good about myself. Of course, I helped more with my job in the workshop, but the Network was something, it was a way of lending him a hand…Now (she refers to the system's post-crisis stage, when it was, she deemed, more convenient to withdraw) I don't have either of those things' (Cristina, ex- participant).

In fact, as shown earlier, women themselves tend to support a male's search for opportunities elsewhere, demonstrating a shared vision of the gendered division of work. Miriam was a member of the Network still participating at the moment of the fieldwork. Her perception was similar to that of most women interviewed, especially those from the most vulnerable sectors:

> 'The thing is, someone has to pay the bills. Men are out there doing *changas*[6] or looking for work. My mother-in-law and I come to the Network, but, in my family, if all of us came to the Network, it would be all very nice but then, what do we do with the bills?' (Miriam, participant).

On the other hand, the very preponderance of women in the Barter Network appears to be a factor in itself creating an encouraging an atmosphere for other women to join (and at the same time, deterring many men from approaching). References to a female-dominated atmosphere, where women established friendship and support groups, were very common among interviewees. This 'therapy effect' seems to have worked for housewives as well as for unemployed and underemployed women:

> 'It was a time when I really needed a distraction. I was closing down my shop. I had a plan for going to the US with some relatives to try our luck there. And then with the issue of the Twin Towers our project was spoiled, we changed our minds. I felt lost. I needed to get out of my house, to talk with other peo-

> ple. In that sense, the Network was a sort of therapy. A group of women and I would arrive earlier, set the buffet and then we all gathered to chat while we had some tea and cake. And we talked about this and that' (Mabel, ex- participant).
>
> 'It is like a club, like a social club. You make friends, you arrange with the other women to meet the following day to go together to another fair. If you have problems in your house…economic, emotional, whatever…it's like you forget for a while. I had lost my job when I joined and I have to say that the Network was a big, big distraction for me. It appeared just when I needed it the most' (Beatriz, participant).

The very constitution of a women's market determined a tendency among participants to engage in activities that were usually an extension of domestic tasks:

> 'I started as a participant. When my friend told me "Come on, let's go…there is one fair here, near your house", I was very reluctant. And I used to say to her, "no, what can I do there?" I couldn't imagine what to take. And I started to do what I did all my life. I was making cakes, ricotta cakes, I also decorated cakes…And without realising, the things that I did in my house slowly motivated me and got me fully involved in the Network' (Silvina, ex- coordinator).

Even if many women did not have the chance to continue employing their specific know-how acquired in previous occupations, the switch to more domestic-related work implied some sort of continuity with the activities performed at home. In this sense, although the loss of an 'authentic job' was often regretted among formerly-employed women, they felt comfortable in relation to their activities in the Network, as they were doing things they knew how to do:

> 'Well, ok, I was an administrative worker, but who doesn't know how to cook? – I mean, women at least. Even if it wasn't my ideal job, I said, "So that's what sells here? Ok, let's cook then"…' (Marta B., ex-participant).

Therefore, the (fluctuating) production levels were preponderantly associated with the activity of cooking, and to a lesser extent, sewing, knitting and the elaboration of small handicrafts. This kind of production only reinforced the predominance of women since it contributed to the creation of a market where the offer was directed toward household provisioning, something little attractive to many men. In this sense, a well-established pattern of male behaviour consisted of arriving at the doors of the fairs while helping to carry heavy bags and then leaving or waiting outside:

> 'I don't know, men would associate the Network with some sort of degradation, we never fully understood it. It was very hard for them to come in – I mean to cross the fair's door. They felt ashamed' (Silvina, ex-coordinator).

During a visit to the fair *Reactivación*[7], I queued at the door with Irene and her hu sband, who had agreed to accompany her to help carry heavy bags. Just as had been related in the accounts of other interviewees, Irene's husband did not enter, and waited outside in a café. Irene defined herself as a housewife, although she also did some street selling during the week. Rodolfo, her husband, was a retired merchant sailor. A conversation with the couple reveals how

men's work histories – more prone to being organised around the notion of stable waged jobs in a particular occupation – are more resilient to change and adaptation. And it also reflects the dependence of many women on their husbands in terms of some money for investment in production:

> 'Irene: - Men don't want to do anything, they don't have imagination. I tell him (her husband), "Do something darling". He has a lot of tools, a room full of tools, I don't know what he bought them for. He could do something with that and bring it to the Network. Today he came, but it's a miracle. Besides, he doesn't even want to enter…
>
> Rodolfo: -You know what happens? I've been a merchant sailor all my life and I'm trained for that job. And this place is a club for women, look at the queue…Besides Irene, don't forget that I'm subsidising you!'

Gender Inequities Within (And Beyond) The Barter Network

When considering whether or not gender inequalities permeated the sphere of the Barter Network, interviewees' accounts suggest that this was the case. As explained earlier, when men joined their activities tended to take on a more commercial aspect. The higher levels of mobility – since men were not constrained by domestic duties, especially childcare – implied that these participants benefited from access to the best places to buy and the best places to sell. The practice of buying at one fair and reselling at another seems to have been particularly profitable during the 'peak' of the movement and appears preponderantly to have been a male activity:

> 'Men are not better or worse than us…the thing is they had more chances. We had a lot of housewives who, because they wanted to lend their husbands a hand, were there. But they had to pick up children from school, cook, all that. Men instead were able to go farther away; they would look in the fairs with cheaper and better products' *(*Mabel*,* ex- participant*)*.

Moreover, most interviewed men acted as intermediaries between the Barter Network and the external economy (mainly the informal economy). The custom of searching around the Network's fairs for second-hand items that could be sold later at informal street markets was a very common one:

> 'The first thing I checked were toys, because at the street fair I sell toys. Then I could go for other things for me, like CD's, a T-shirt, a cake for my house, whatever…(…) but there was a point when the quality of things became very poor (he refers to the movement's post-crisis stage), it wasn't possible to sell those things outside. Then I quit, because the main reason that took me to the Network was that: to find merchandise for the street fair' (Diego, ex-participant).
>
> 'It was a matter of searching very carefully…People were taking everything from their homes, and you could find very valuable things…some people didn't know what they were selling at all (…) well, that was their problem. I

> am a merchant, I see the opportunity and seize it. That's the society we live in (…) At that time, I was doing good business at the *Mercado* (a street fair), my stand was always full of things I got from the Network*'* (Tadeo, participant).

Men's interplay between the Barter Network and the informal economy proved highly dynamic, taking on different forms and directions such as the one described below:

> 'There was this group of men – but when the Network was huge – that had gotten together to bring meat from the countryside, they brought so much…the thing is that their prices were unbelievably expensive and they "dried up" the fair. We had no *credits* left to trade after they came! And there were rumours that they were paying the peasants that gave them the animals with *credits* as well…imagine what a good deal!'(Irene, participant).

Women, Participation And Empowerment

The question of whether or not women's participation in the Barter Network was an empowering activity does not have a straightforward answer. On the one hand, this kind of work did report increased levels of independence from husbands or partners. Many women started to cover most basic households needs by themselves without the need for consulting their partners. As told by many female interviewees, the Barter Network was a domain where men tended not to interfere. This is particularly the case of housewives whose partners had intermittent informal work or were unemployed and therefore approved of this novel way of provisioning:

> 'My husband was very happy…Imagine, I brought lots of things to the house when he was out of work. He'd even ask me to bring him this or that…I was giving him gifts with my money! (…) No, he didn't want to come to the Network at all. I don't know why, he didn't like the atmosphere, he said…Well, you know what happened?: he was busy looking for some job opportunity. He finally found it (…) But during the time he was unemployed I felt very good being able to support my home with my work' (Dora, participant).

> 'My husband doesn't interfere at all, no (the interviewee was still participating at the time of the fieldwork). What's more, he's pleased that I bring lots of things and we can save some of his money from the *changas*[8] for paying ce r-tain things, you know, the ones you need *Pesos*[9] for. Like taxes, water, ele c-tricity, all that…And for me it's good to come here and to know that I'm contributing to the household. Because I can't work, I have three children, as I told you' (Silvia M., participant).

Women whose partners had more stable jobs (or, more generally, had *recovered* this type of job) faced some reproaches, in the form of teasing and mild complaints about their short absences from home. Some husbands stigmatised the Barter Network as a marginal sphere where their wives did not belong. Some tense situations are described by housewives who had to utilise some of their partners' income in order to derive some investment for production:

> 'When my husband went back to work again – he got a job in an office where he distributes the mail – he started to insist on my staying more with the baby. "What are you going to do there with all those people?," he said. He thought a part-time job would have been all right but he didn't like the fact that I was using his money to invest in the Network and the fact that I was traveling so much. "We don't need that, and we have a baby who needs you more," he used to say. He was right' (Zulma, ex-participant).

> 'At the end, my husband wouldn't want to give me money for the Network anymore. Maybe he was right; there was hardly anything to buy there anymore (the interviewee refers to the movement's post-crisis stage). I wanted to go because, in a sense, it offered me a distraction…Anyway, we were cross with each other for a while. His shop was working well again and he didn't approve of the Network at all. It was something for the poor, he said' (Elisa, ex-participant).

Although extreme situations like the latter were rare, the general pattern among women whose partners have a more or less stable income is one of moderate discomfort. This configures a panorama where for partners (and sometimes also for sons and daughters) work within the Barter Network was only fully acceptable as an emergency solution to economic hardship. Such pattern relates to Jackson and Walsh's (1987) concept of 'family homeostasis'. This means that domestic units develop habitual ways of dealing with everyday living, which become taken for granted and highly valued. And these models of organisation tend to rest heavily on gendered divisions of labour within the family. In the presence of disrupting situations like unemployment (where the most disturbing pattern tends to be that of male unemployment) such lifestyles are resistent to change, and efforts are made to restore the family system to what it had always been. Resolving the problem of male unemployment (or underemployment) obviously brings about efforts to reestablish roles as they were before, something that becomes evident in the testimonies of these interviewees.

Even though women, especially housewives and those with precarious jobs, tend to report increased independence, the downside of participation has to do with the increased workload. This was especially the case during the movement's peak, where the practice of circulating through several fairs during the week or even in one day was a common one. This modality often implied covering long distances carrying heavy bags. Many women engaged in this practice, even when they already had some kind of paid job. The situation implied a heavy workload which many found difficult to cope with. Marta G., a participant in the fair *Reactivación*, explains what one day in her life is like:

> 'It's a tough work. I wake up a 3am. First I have to arrive very early at my job at the Mercado Central[10] where I sell vegetables. Then at 1 pm, when the ma r-ket closes, I go around asking for all those vegetables that have reached their sell-by date. People know me there and they give me boxes for free. Then my daughter picks me up in my husband's truck and we go to the house to wash and prepare the vegetables. Then we come here (to the Network's fair) at 3pm to sell the vegetables. I'm back home by 7pm. and exhausted…(…) I do this three times a week, but before (she refers to the peak stage of the movement), when there were fairs near my house open everyday, I used to do this daily

> (…) and then yes, you have to prepare dinner all that stuff, but my daughter helps me a lot with that'.

Thus, many women, by participating in this market, were performing a 'triple role': that is, they had to deal with domestic tasks, paid work and the Barter Network activities. And what is more, work in the Barter Network could be criticised as an extension of their assigned gender roles in another dimension, as this was a market mainly directed at the provisioning of the household.However, the Barter Network did create a sphere outside of male interference. Many women categorise the *credits* as 'their own money' and highlight the positive aspect of being paid for tasks they had not conceived of as real work before.

It was among women who got involved in the movement's organisational aspects – particularly the coordination of the Networks' fairs – where the clearer patterns of female empowerment were observed. At the moment of the fieldwork, Silvina was a thirty-six-year-old housewife with limited experience in the labour market. She had only known work as a secretary before her children were born, twelve years earlier. In 1999, she joined the movement and soon became involved in organisational matters. However, as the system's crisis deepened, Silvina felt that the situation was too chaotic and decided to withdraw. Despite her disappointment with the ending of the experience, her testimony exemplifies a process of developing skills and gaining self-confidence:

> 'Since I left the Network, I have had this feeling of emptiness. It is very difficult to fill in this gap in my life now. I started as a participant, and then I became a coordinator. After a while, the leaders proposed my becoming a regional supervisor. This means that I had under my wings all the fairs of the zone. I was acting as a mediator between all the coordinators of the zone and the leaders (…) Anyway, I was constantly active at that time: traveling, coming and going, getting in touch with people. Personally, it helped me a lot. I was a person who could not speak in public, I was very shy…and then I found myself giving training courses for…I don't know…100 people. It helped me so much, although now I have this feeling of emptiness I was telling you about'.

Nonetheless, it must be pointed out that this type of account was found only among a minority of women who had access to the coordination of fairs. Moreover, participants from impoverished middle class sectors were heavily over-represented among coordinators (to the detriment of their long-term poor counterparts). For the vast majority of women who did not get involved at this level, empowerment seems to derive from increased independence in relation to the decisions of household purchases, the concrete valuation of their domestic activities, and the access to spaces for socialising other than in their homes.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

According to the data analysed the Barter Network always exhibited – with fluctuations over time- a clear preponderance of female members. Moreover, there was a strong trend among participants to conceive of the Barter Network as a female domain. Further, it is interesting to note that it was both men and women who pointed at this sphere as being one inappropriate for men. The many references (also backed by direct observation) to unemployed men helping

women to carry their bags with merchandise to the fair doors and waiting for them outside appears suggestive regarding the gendered perception of this market. For many female interviewees, the Barter Network was only suitable for women seeking to 'lend a hand' to their male partners in times of economic hardship. Men, instead, were expected to devote all of their time to looking for 'real jobs'. Quite obviously, income in legal tender was indispensable for participants in order to make ends meet. But the fact that most men were expected to stay out of the Barter Network, their responsibility being almost exclusively that of looking for jobs in the mainstream market, responds to strong normative frameworks pointing out specific expectations for each gender.

It is interesting to note that at the time when the country's economic crisis reached its worst point, the proportion of men in the Barter Network - although still under-represented among participants - increased. The peaking rates of unemployment, combined with the fact that the Barter Network became a wealthier market, seemed to have attracted more men into the initiative. However, tracing a parallel with reviewed studies on street trade, men's activities appear as being more lucrative than those of women. The predominantly male strategy of buying cheaper products at some Barter Network fairs and selling them at higher prices at others, was a common one reported by many interviewees. Men also seem to have been preponderant among those wholesalers of staples acquired in the mainstream market and later resold at the Barter Network. Moreover, men were a majority among the group that circulated through different fairs in order to gather goods that were later to be commercialised in street trade. Accordingly to the findings from reviewed studies on street vending (Acho-Chi, 2002; Babb, 1989; Blanc, 1998a; Bunster and Chaney, 1989; Bromley, 1988), in the case of the Barter Network these practices were prevalent among men because of their having been more mobile, as, unlike women, they were not constrained by domestic duties and childcare responsibilities.

Despite these inequalities, it is fair to recognise that women found in this market a sphere which provided both economic benefits and a highly-valued space for female sociability. It could be argued that women's participation did not translate to significant levels of empowerment since the type of work and consumption they tended to engage in constituted an extension of their role as household caregivers. However, the problem can be more accurately analysed taking into account Levy and Moser's (1986) distinction between two kinds of gender needs: the 'practical' ones related to facilitating the fulfillment of traditional female roles, and the 'strategic' ones, which are directly linked with the political fight for a redefinition of gender roles. If women's involvement in this organisation was clearly linked with practical gender needs, this does not mean that their participation could not imply important – though slow and difficult to assess – advances in the strategic dimension. From the more basic advancements, such as receiving some kind of material retribution for domestic activities that are not usually perceived as 'work', to more significant progress, such developing leadership skills in the organisation of the movement, many women seem to have benefited beyond their more immediate needs. If one is to understand the fulfillment of strategic gender needs as the final result of cumulative empowering experiences, the Barter Network certainly showed potential for contribution in this respect.

FOOTNOTES

[1] The original piece of work also included interviews with leaders, but these are not depicted in this article.

[2] The region was chosen since it is the country's most densely populated one: it comprises nearly 31.6 % of the national population (according to the Census 2001). Moreover, literature review on the topic, newspaper articles and word-of-mouth information from leaders confirmed that this was the epicentre – in terms of the number of fairs and participants - of the Barter Network movement.

[3] This particular paper focuses on the experiences of women and thus deploys a subset of selected interviews (16 interviews, 13 with women and three with men).

[4] The questionnaires employed for the original piece of work enquired as to four temporal dimensions of partic i-pation: early development (from 1995 to 1998), the peak of the movement (from 1999 to mid-2002), the crisis (second half of 2002) and the post-crisis stage (2003).

[5] Among the 20 women interviewed for this study (including participants and coordinators 10 interviewees had always had informal, intermittent self-employment. These women worked as occasional part-time street vendors, domestic workers, caterers and masseuses, to name some occupations. Another five interviewees had been full-time housewives for most of their lives. The labour experiences of the remaining five – although generally un-employed at the moment of the fieldwork – had mostly been organised around full-time jobs. This article de-ploys quotations from 13 female interviewees: five part-time self-employed workers, three housewives and five women who had mostly been full-time workers.

[6] Informal self-employment characterised by high degrees of precariousness, expressed in its intermittence and low levels of remuneration.

[7] 'Reactivation' in English

[8] Informal self-employment characterised by high degrees of precariousness, expressed in its intermi ttence and low levels of remuneration.

[9] Argentina's formal currency.

[10] The *Mercado Central* (Central Market) is a market for bulk buying situated on the outskirts of the city of Bu e-nos Aires.

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