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Emancipatory social work and social intervention: contributions from Argentinian social work

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In this article, we give a general presentation of what we mean by *social intervention* from the political-ideological, theoretical-methodological and epistemological perspective that we have referred to in a recent work as 'emancipatory social work'. First, we briefly refer to the meaning of emancipation. Second, we discuss a way of thinking about and doing social work that we call 'emancipatory social work', an approach practised from Argentina through Latin America to the Caribbean as a response to the challenges involved in the changing times of 'Our America', as the Cuban poet Jose Martí called the great Latin American nation. In the third part, we analyse the main features of social intervention, conceived as a form of social work, and the implications that these have for training and the political-professional project.

key words social intervention • social work • social emancipation • Latin America • Argentina

Introduction

In Argentina, there is a diversity of ways of thinking about and doing social work. Some of these we have referred to in our book *The political-ideological dimension of social work: Keys to an emancipatory social work* (Martínez and Agüero, 2008). This heterogeneity has historical, political and cultural roots. It is also linked to various modes of institutionalisation and orientations and conceptions of social work that were developed in our country, and that gave rise to a multiplicity of types of training, qualifications, ways of organising the profession, forms of practice and modes of social intervention.

In this article, we give a general presentation of what we mean by *social intervention* from the political-ideological, theoretical-methodological and epistemological perspective that we have referred to in a recent work as 'emancipatory social work' (Martínez and Agüero, 2014). First, we briefly refer to the meaning of emancipation. In the next part, we discuss that way of thinking about and doing social work that we call 'emancipatory social work', an approach practised from Argentina through Latin America to the Caribbean as a response to the challenges involved in the changing times of 'Our America', as the Cuban poet Jose Martí called the great Latin American nation. In the third part, we analyse the main features of social intervention, conceived as a form of social work, and the implications that these have for training and the political-professional project.

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The meanings of emancipation

The central category in the approach of emancipatory social work is *emancipation*. This term has an old legal meaning related to the power of a master to release a slave. It can also refer to the termination of a parent's rights over a minor whose 'emancipation' enabled him to enter adulthood. Historically, it has had different meanings, but it is during the period of Modernity that it acquired its fundamental sense of a break with the old regime (the Middle Ages) and a new era of unlimited progress. The idea that history has a progressive dynamic and goes forward to final perfection, guided by human rationality, has been at the core of Modernity and might even be said to constitute its essence (Vattimo, 2004: 39).

Ernesto Laclau criticises this notion of emancipation arising from Modernity. For Laclau, this notion has six distinct dimensions that do not constitute a logically organised whole or a coherent logical structure. The first is the *dichotomous* dimension, given by the radical discontinuity between the emancipatory moment and the social order that precedes it. The second is the *holistic* dimension since emancipation covers all areas of social life and, in turn, these areas themselves have an interdependent relationship. The third is the *transparency* dimension since if alienation is totally eradicated, there would be no place for any relationship of power or representation, nor a distinction of subject and object. The fourth is the *pre-existence* dimension of what must be emancipated with respect to the emancipatory act since there is no emancipation without oppression. The fifth is the *foundational* dimension, which is inherent to any project of radical emancipation as a creator of a new order. The sixth is the *rationalist* dimension, which realises the centrality of reason instead of divine revelation (Laclau, 1996: 11–12).

Boaventura de Sousa Santos also criticises Modernity's notion of emancipation and stresses the need to reinvent it in three dimensions: epistemological, theoretical and political. He proposes the construction of an *epistemology of the South*, which reveals the visibility and credibility of cognitive practices of classes, people and social groups who have been historically exploited and oppressed by global capitalism and colonialism (De Sousa Santos, 2009). Also, he proposes the need to reinvent critical theory out of multiculturalism, postcolonialism and a new rationality (De Sousa Santos, 2006: 46). In addition, he suggests the need to build 'high intensity democracies', recovering the diversity of democratic forms that existed prior to the model of liberal representative democracy imposed by countries that support a hegemonic world order (De Sousa Santos, 2006: 71).

The notion of emancipation in Modernity is also addressed by Karl Marx. 'The Jewish Question' tackles for the first time the problem of human emancipation in general and its correlation with political emancipation. This early essay does not explain how to achieve human emancipation, who should carry it out and by what means. This is addressed in his later writings. According to Marx, human emancipation is embodied in historical subjects who strive for it in concrete situations, analysing the historical reality, deploying strategies and carrying out specific actions that involve, in turn, the relationship between theory and practice. The historical subject of human emancipation is the proletariat, which, according to Marx, constitutes the singular layer that encapsulates the process of disintegration of capitalist society. This layer concentrates the radical needs that demand a radical revolution. Therefore, in order to free itself as a class, it must break the chains that bind the rest of the exploited

ones. However, capitalism has developed science and technology and transformed the productive forces and the forms of exploitation in such a way that, in the 21st century, the historical subject of human emancipation is not as homogeneous as was the 19th-century proletariat, but a social subject whose composition is broad and varied and is built from the bottom up, taking into account the needs and specific tasks in each political and social context.

For Marx, human emancipation is based on the need to overcome alienation. There is a contradiction for the citizen, who enjoys an alleged political equality but whose material existence is characterised by social inequality. In this sense, alienation and human emancipation are themselves two mutually exclusive processes as the latter can only be achieved when there is no alienation. Marx distinguishes human emancipation from political emancipation. While recognising the progress made during Modernity in terms of political emancipation from the old feudal structures of the Middle Ages (equality before the law, individual freedom and citizenship, etc), he conceived human emancipation as a qualitatively superior process and different from political emancipation because it relates to the daily life of individuals and the economic, political, social and cultural conditions that influence it. In this sense, although political emancipation is necessary and essential for freedom, the effective exercise of this freedom is not possible unless there is full human emancipation. Now, to create the conditions for the exercise of freedom is not something simple and easy, but a complex process fraught with all kind of contradictions, conflicts, ambitions, wars of interest, progresses and retreats, encounters and disagreements, crises, struggles, and confrontations with those who have the power and the economic and political control of the means of production.

Over the years and in the course of the historical events that happened throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, Marx's initial position, sometimes seen as reflecting the views of the 'First Marx' or the 'Young Marx', was substantially modified. In Volume 1 of *Capital* (Marx, 1867), there is a shift towards the economic base, the social relationships of production as an explanatory principle of all social relationships and, particularly, of what he calls superstructure, consisting of political, legal, ideological and cultural issues. In *Circular of working classes* (Marx, 1867), written in 1864 for the 1st International, Marx analysed the course of the labour movement from 1848, marked by major failures, where he recognised the relief provided by the 10-hour Working-Day Act and the role of the cooperative movement.

The 'First Marx' rejected cooperatives and considered them an obstacle in the revolutionary struggle. However, in *Circular*, he recognised their achievements and stated that 'this movement could triumph over the power of the capital only if it developed in national dimensions' (Marx, 1867). Further, he argued that 'the conquest of political power becomes a great obligation of the working classes because it is the only way to avoid the political economy of the proletariat succumbing before the power of the political economy of the bourgeoisie' (Zibechi, 2005:18).

Marx turns to politics and the state, two entities that, in the past, he used to reject because he believed in the autonomous power of the proletariat. Previously, he held that 'the emancipation of the working class will only be the work of the workers themselves' (Zibechi, 2005: 13). The historical subject of emancipation for the Young Marx was the proletariat, acting as an autonomous organisation of politics and the state. Now, he changes his position and recognises the need to take power through political action. He recognises that the class struggle is a political struggle,

and that the revolution is also political. This turn deepened after the failure of the Paris Commune in 1871. The state thus becomes the new historical subject of emancipation (Zibechi, 2005: 20).

At present, emancipation has to do with the political struggles against neoliberal globalisation carried out by several groups and social movements all over the world. One of these movements is alterglobalism, called such because its slogan ‘*another world is possible*’. One of its most famous manifestations is the organisation of the World Social Forum, meetings that, since 2001, have been held in different countries of the world. For the alterglobalism movement, emancipation is any action that allows a subject or a social group access to a state of autonomy through the elimination of authority or power. This is a concept that aims to promote fairer societies, free from any domination and oriented towards real equality. It includes political and socio-economic emancipation, respect for human dignity, the right of recognition and a decent life for all human beings, and environmental preservation.

Another meaning of emancipation relates to the political struggles conducted by feminist movements in the world, which have deployed several emancipatory processes, with a wide range of meanings, feelings, ideas and theoretical, epistemological and political positions that make them difficult to summarise or condense. These emancipatory processes, although different, have in common the struggle against every form of oppression, inequality and discrimination experienced by women, as well as against the order sustained by patriarchy, capitalism and colonialism.

Emancipatory social work

Emancipatory social work seeks to be a response to this deep and existential demand of human history for emancipation and also a response to the challenges posed by the struggles for emancipation deployed in ‘our America’. What do we mean when we talk about social work? As with alterglobalism and feminism, in social work, there is a connection with political-ideological struggles carried out during the 1960s and 1970s. Back then, nobody talked about emancipation, but rather liberation. A liberatory social work was proposed (Macías Gómez and Lacayo de Macías, 1973). These were times of reconceptualisation and the experience of a historical moment of deep social and political changes. The view was that social workers should fulfil a strategic role in society as teachers and popular educators, leaders, activists, and protagonist in changes urgently demanded by the Latin-American people.

The dilemma was *liberation* or *dependency*. Paulo Freire (1970) talked about a ‘liberatory education’; Theotonio Dos Santos (1974) spoke of ‘dependency theory’; and many progressive bishops and priests discussed ‘liberation theology’ (Gutiérrez Merino, 1968; Boff, 1978). To the Latin-American Church, liberation has a theological sense; to Freire and Dos Santos, liberation has a political and ideological sense that approaches the notion of emancipation.

For a country, emancipation involves both the capacity and the possibility for political sovereignty or self-determination as a people. For a society or social group, or for the social subjects that comprise it, it is the capacity and the potential for autonomy or self-determination as a society. In both cases, it is a development that goes beyond freedom or liberation and involves two basic conditions: (1) real capacity; and (2) real possibility to decide their own destiny or project of life and can carry it out, accepting its consequences.

The two key words that define the meaning of emancipation are *capability* and *possibility*. It is not just about being free or a person having choice over what he or she wants to do with their life, but about how to make it real and effective. This involves both capability and possibility. Capability refers to social subjects; possibility refers to the historical conditions in which these subjects are constituted and perform. There is no capability without subjects, nor is there possibility without the right historical conditions.

In the process of emancipation, we distinguish three basic components: liberation, autonomy and historical conditions. *Liberation* means freedom and independence. It is emancipation 'of', in the sense of being free from subjection to something. In the 1960s and 1970s, people talked about being free from imperialism and domination. This is a necessary condition for beginning the process of emancipation; it is the termination of captivity, slavery or submission, and the retrieval of freedom. However, by itself, freedom and independence are not enough. For a prisoner released from prison, it is clear that the simple liberation is not enough to survive and develop himself as a human being, but it is an essential step, a *sine qua non* condition for emancipation.

The second component is *autonomy*. We can define it as the capability and opportunity to make one's own decisions and set one's own rules. The maximum degree of autonomy is sovereignty, or the self-determination of a people that makes it independent of any external subjection by another people. Below this maximum, there is relative autonomy. In any case, this implies the existence of a subject capable of exercising autonomy. It is the *subject of emancipation*. The process of emancipation involves the existence of subjects who can carry it out. If there is no subject, then this process is not viable. For this reason, it is also a *sine qua non* requirement to accomplish a process of emancipation. The construction of autonomy and the constitution of the subject to exercise it are two sides of the same coin. Autonomy is the ability of a subject, but it is also the possibility to freely exercise this ability. Freedom or liberation is a necessary condition to exercise autonomy, but this, in turn, is not possible without subjects. At the same time, the process of emancipation builds subjects, freedom and autonomy in a dialectical way. This means that the process of emancipation is neither linear nor closed; it is not something finished, but something in constant motion, in constant construction and reconfiguration. Emancipation builds freedom, autonomy and subjectivity, but these, in turn, allow the process of emancipation to develop.

The third component is the *historical conditions*. In *The eighteenth brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Karl Marx (2011: 12) says: 'Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past'. As mentioned earlier, the process of emancipation is a dialectical process that does not occur outside the historical conditions of the social subjects, that is to say, outside of the circumstances depicted by Marx, which were not chosen by the subjects, but right there, crossing, conditioning and configuring them. From these conditions or historical circumstances emerge the real possibilities of social emancipation. Only within this historical context can subjects develop their capabilities, abilities, strategies and projects of life. This is the framework of action within which subjects exist and that sets both limits and possibilities. In this sense, emancipation is not an announcement, but a historical fact. It means materiality, namely, capability and the real possibility of historical action on the part of the subjects. Emancipation is a fact; it means writing history and not just participating in the history that other

people write or, even worse, avoiding it. The history that others write is alienation; it is a denial of the subject. Therefore, our proposal of emancipatory social work has a critical nucleus consisting of the following as conditions to carry it out: (1) the construction of social subjects; (2) living worlds; (3) identity processes; (4) social ties; and (5) citizenship.

Social subjects are constituted in a relationship with their living worlds. These micro-social spaces are where daily life goes on and where the macro-social is condensed. Subjectivity comes from intersubjectivities and these, in turn, are crossed by the macro-social context. There is not externality between the context and the lifeworld of subjects, but this last is configured by that one. At the same time, the living world is what we build as social subjects, which has meaning for us. It is the web of meanings that we attach to everything that encompasses and constitutes us as subjects. We recognise ourselves as subjects in a world that has meaning for us. The living world constitutes us as social subjects and, in turn, we configure it as such. That is, we constitute ourselves as social subjects when building our living worlds in such a way that we are in a dialectical/binomial subject–world that seems indivisible. This dialectical relationship occurs in a precise time and in a specific space; it is historical.

Identities are constitutive of social subjects. We do not have a single identity as individuals, but are crossed by multiple identities. These are stitches that amalgamate and condense the diversity, multiplicity and multidimensionality of our subjectivity. Each identity assumes a specific content of gender, race, ethnicity, class or social state. Moreover, we adhere to citizenship as ‘the right to have rights’, and this implies social bonds, that is to say, links, ties, social schemes and networks of social relationships that are established among members of a specific social formation. These ties have permanence in time, meaning, sense and purpose, namely, intentionality. The concept of citizenship to which we adhere involves historicity, social conscience, participation in decision-making and recognition of differences and power relations, but these dimensions presuppose the existence of social ties, as a previous requirement of social cohesion and the social project, because citizenship always refers to a social group and not to individual subjects.

This *critical nucleus*, in turn, is crossed by three major systems of oppression that have historically configured the construction of a current social order and continue to be completely active: patriarchy, capitalism and colonialism. Therefore, our proposal of emancipatory social work is anti-patriarchal, anti-capitalist and anti-colonialist. We reject patriarchy because:

1. it constitutes an authoritarian and reactionary system based on an alleged supremacy and superiority of men over women and men’s supposed rights to perpetuate a historically constituted order from, for and by men;
2. it is functional to capitalism because it justifies the sexual division of work and the supposed inferiority of women based on historical inequalities constituted and replicated by men;
3. it encourages oppression and social domination, supporting and justifying by philosophy, science, politics and religion the historical construction and social reproduction of myths, prejudices and stereotypes concerning the supposed inferiority and congenital weakness of women;
4. it violates the most basic human rights by supporting and replicating a social order that does not allow women to fully practise their rights to freedom, to a

dignified life, to be respected as a human being, to equality before the law, to a dignified job, to practise a profession, to the full development of their human capabilities and potentialities, to free association and to express their ideas, and to develop themselves as a political subject, among other rights;

5. it encourages and justifies violence to sustain and perpetuate an order that justifies the abuse of power and the authoritarianism of men, and that promotes the obedience, submission and subordination of women;
6. it does not take into account the right to be different, supporting an androcentric system with a unique point of view that does not take into account women's perspective, or what they feel, want or desire;
7. it does not respect women's freedom of choice, instead imposing on them an order based on men's preferences, interests and convenience; and
8. it is incompatible with a democratic and egalitarian social and familial order in the exercise of rights, power and real possibilities between men and women.

We reject capitalism as a system of social organisation because it is based on the exploitation of man by man, the consequence of which is the concentration of wealth in few hands while a huge majority of the population lack the basics of life. This generates inequality, oppression and social domination, and its most serious consequence is the state of helplessness and social injustice of social subjects. The processes of alienation that capitalism causes are incompatible with the construction of autonomous social subjects. The individualisation and commodification in social relationships that capitalism produces work against the construction of social ties, encourage social fragmentation and anomie, and prevent us from thinking about the real and effective practice of citizenship. Similarly, in conditions of exploitation, social subjects can hardly think about configuring their living worlds or rebuilding life projects.

Finally, we reject colonialism because we oppose and deeply question the process of colonialism, colonisation and cultural domination of our Latin-American people. On the contrary, the construction of social subjects, social ties and citizenship in this kind of social work requires a process of cultural decolonisation that involves the reconfiguring of individuals' living worlds and the development of identity processes based on the revaluation of our native experience and the recovery of symbols and local cultural meanings, in popular knowledge, in indigenous languages and in experiences of popular religiosity, among others.

Social intervention from the perspective of emancipatory social work

Social intervention occurs not in a vacuum, but in a specific historical, social and institutional context, which shapes it. It denotes *praxis* and has certain constituent features that we call *emancipatory praxis*. Among these constituent features, the following are the most important: meaning, subjectivity, training, multidimensionality, daily routine, interaction, contradiction and conflict, power, awareness, popularisation of knowledge, research, and an acute perception of reality.

This context, configured by historical conditions, is not 'outside of' social intervention, but shapes intervention, as well as the subjects and their life spaces. The fragility of institutions is highlighted in this context. They struggle to fulfil their

original objectives since social problems are of such complexity that they go beyond these institutions and, in addition, are strongly shaped by the political-ideological dimension. This bigger context is present in every situation that social workers address because the macro-social is embodied in the micro-social and constitutes a condensation of it.

This context also generates the objective and subjective conditions of the subjects of *praxis*. These conditions can create synergies or can obstruct the processes of emancipation. However, they condition but do not determine individuals since they always keep their processing capacity intact. As Anthony Giddens (1995) argues in *The theory of social structure*, in facing any course of action, individuals can choose other courses of action. That is, beyond the adversities or obstacles that occur, a possibility of change always remains; otherwise, we would fall into a historical or linear determinism, which we expressly rejected.

Emancipatory social work requires located professional in a determined time and space, in a collective project with which they can self-identify rooted, in social meanings inscribed, with capacity to build social meanings, subjectified by intersubjective relations and with capacity to build subjectivities with whom they interact.

In emancipatory praxis, the subjectivity of social workers is built into the project of a particular kind of intersubjectivity, built into sharing the living world of another, the intimacy of everyday life, the emotional experiences, how to be in the world and relate to others, and a way of being, feeling and acting. Professional practice allows these workers to build with other social subjects a kind of relationship that is very different from that being built within other professions. This comes about from a symbolic world where things have a specific meaning for the individuals.

Furthermore, our proposal of emancipatory social work shares certain elements in common with popular education. Indeed, both have as a field of social practice the popular sectors where the consequences of public politics and the actions of powerful social actors are strongly felt. Both also have as an intended consequence the transformation of reality, seeking to reverse the situation of oppression and social domination.

In both cases, there is also an emphasis on training and education. Education is an example of theoretical reflection and the development of critical awareness in social subjects in order to understand and interpret reality, while training is an example of the acquisition or development of skills or competencies in order to transform aspects of reality. They also share an approach to social reality from a multidimensional perspective, with the emphasis on everyday life and interaction with individuals as a basic strategy of praxis.

An important issue for emancipatory social work to consider, as popular education does, is contradiction and conflict as constitutive elements of social life and not as anomalies and deviations. Here, we have to remove a deeply rooted functionalist and systemic approach in social work that upholds the principle of normality, harmony and the functionality of social relationships and social systems, considering any conflict or contradiction as anomaly, diversion or dysfunction that should be corrected or adjusted.

Likewise, an emancipatory social work involves developing the ability to build a critical and organisational awareness and the skills to fight side to side with popular sectors. We cannot proclaim change from a coffee shop or sit comfortably in the office.

Hence, we rescue from popular education the commitment to action, a dialectical view of reality, practice as a privileged space for reflection and action, an integrated approach to social problems, consistency in the formulation of strategies, the pursuit of real participation, and, especially, the construction of popular power.

Moreover, the magnitude and complexity of social problems requires social workers to be strongly prepared, trained and competent from a professional point of view. This implies not only a political-ideological training, but also a solid epistemological, theoretical and methodological education – above all, to learn the trade, that is, how to do things in the territory. Social workers who are ‘at the front line’ of social problems, as it is usually called, should be the most capable and most competent.

Besides, we are convinced that the construction of a professional group involves participation in, and occupation of, all social, political and institutional spaces of praxis by social workers. Such is the case, for example, of professional organisations, which are strategic spaces of struggle and the construction of power. The greater the participation and presence of the professional group in society, the greater the recognition of social work as a profession and the greater the symbolic capital accumulated. The alternative is a process of the impoverishment and invisibility of the professional field.

Another important aspect of the praxis of emancipatory social work is research. A professional attitude means not giving up and persisting in asking the question ‘Why?’, having more doubts than certainties, and recognising that there is not enough training to deal with the multiplicity and complexity of social problems. It requires, therefore, an attitude of permanent questioning. In this sense, we must link scientific research with the real needs and problems of the people, so that ‘social relevance’ is not just words in an article or project, but a reality.

In this sense, emancipatory social work involves a process of the popularisation of scientific knowledge. It is necessary to build bridges to connect popular knowledge with scientific knowledge, and vice versa. This is a political task, not a technical or technocratic one, since it tries to perceive the real needs and problems of the people and to be able to study them and propose a solution.

Similarly, emancipatory social work means professionals with an acute perception of reality, that is, social workers who are capable of seeing the invisible and hearing the unheard. This perceptive ability is not innate, but built with education, training and professional practice. It is a part of the profession of social workers. It means being challenged by reality and challenging it in turn, in a ‘double dialectical’ game. It denotes the denaturing and deconstruction of reality, finding meaning, and discovering and interpreting the rules of the game of power. It signifies reading between the lines of hegemonic speech, seeing what is not being said.

Experiences of intervention from an emancipatory social work perspective

In order to provide some empirical evidence of emancipatory social work, we describe two experiences of social interventions with women from this perspective. The first is a case of women in familial violence situations from Posadas, the capital of the province of Misiones, Argentina. The second is an experience with women from San Pedro, one city situated in the north-east of Misiones.

Misiones is an Argentine province with a population that exceeds 1,100,000 inhabitants. Posadas is the capital of Misiones, with one third of the total provincial population concentrated there. Provincial Office of Domestic Violence works at Posadas, which is an office of the Provincial Ministry of Social Development, Women and Youth. In this office operates the 102 phone line, which reports family violence cases. Reported cases through the 102 phone line or in person are dealt with by professionals who work in the office.

Since 2010, we have worked with social intervention experiences based on Mutual Aid Groups or Self-Help Groups. These groups work with women and men involved in familial violence cases. Our statistics show that more than 90% of reported cases of violence are against women and only 2% are against men. The rest of the cases are against elderly people, children and disabled people. The professional team that coordinates these groups is formed by social workers and psychologists.

Experiences with women develop faster and easier than experiences with males. The resistance of men is strong at first because they fear losing control over women, but also because of insecurity, prejudice, inferiority complexes and the constructed and reproduced patriarchal gender stereotypes. Work with males could, however, be undertaken, but not without the accumulation of moments of strong tension. They are violent subjects that blame women and do not recognise their responsibility for the problem. However, the systematic intervention of professionals and interaction processes generates conditions for emotional crises, weeping, tears and finally recognition of the problem. At this point, processes of reconfiguration of these men's subjectivities are initiated. For them, this means a great challenge. The violent masculinity built over years suddenly explodes into a thousand pieces. This allows them to think and build another form of relationship without violence. The release not only allows them to rebuild themselves as autonomous subjects, but also to rebuild social bonds, intersubjectivity and power relations. It even changes how they look at life in society, including social and family relationships. There is a return to a place in the world, discovering new meanings and thinking about new projects. After Mutual Aid Group or Self-Help Group experiences, some results observed in these males were: the recuperation of their couple relationships; the formation of new couples; the rediscovery of themselves; the emergence of a new outlook on the world; the discovery of new opportunities based on respect for others; the challenge of building non-violent relationship; and opportunities for personal development. Social intervention from the emancipatory social work perspective triggers these processes and generates new conditions for subjectivity configuration processes.

In the case of women, the starting point is the recognition of the problem. This is a hard question because women in violence situations tend to assimilate and adapt the discourses of the men subjecting them to violence. They build all sorts of justifications and fictional stories in order to hide the problem. This does not help to recognise the problem. The reality of women in violence situations is usually very hard and cruel; the charming prince turns into a nightmare; the father of the children turns into a cruel despot; and the once-loved, or perhaps still-loved, man is he who hurts and treats them as a despicable thing without value. To recognise this is very hard for these women and requires the systematic effort of professionals. When the time comes for recognition, bursting into tears and emotional crises are inevitable. This process is absolutely necessary; it is one absolutely necessary step and the way to be able to start the process of subjectivity reconstruction.

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After weeping and crisis, the process of self-recognition as women begins. To self-see as women and not as things is the starting point. In this way, the recognition of both other women and the professionals who coordinate the group is essential. Women begin to show some external changes, which accompany the changes in the process of subjectivity reconfiguration. These changes are usually seen in clothing, make-up, hair and body care, and ornaments, and also in more firm and resolute walking. Women slowly recover their self-esteem, return to smiling, change their look and recover all or part of those things that once were. It is like a return from death and hell; it is like to relive. It is like to recover the dreams, to dare to dream, to propose things, to construct projects and to live again. Here, also, emancipatory social work generates the conditions for the reconstruction of subjects and subjectivities, non-violent social bonds, and non-violent life in society.

Another experience that we want to provide as empirical evidence of emancipatory social work is a social intervention with women from San Pedro, Misiones, Argentina, more specifically, from the neighbourhood of Irrazábal. This experience begins in 2009 in the framework of a social programme called the 'Neighborhoods Improvement Program', better known by the acronym PROMEBA, formulated by the National Ministry of Social Development and financed by the Inter-American Development Bank. The objectives of the programme are the improvement of the living conditions of the more vulnerable urban population through the construction of lace-up ditches, paving, public lighting and urban sanitation, the granting of property titles and access to drinking water and electricity, planting trees, community organising, and the construction and equipping of community social headquarters.

San Pedro city is located in the north-east of Misiones. It is accessed by national route 14, travelling a distance of 280 km from Posadas, the capital of the province. It is a geographical area characterised by copses of old araucaria pine and native hardwood forest. It has steep topographic slopes and great biodiversity. Since 2003, the programme ran in San Pedro and other municipalities of Misiones. PROMEBA neighbourhoods are underserved and have highly vulnerable and low-income populations who develop informal economic activities and have unmet basic needs. Irrazábal neighbourhood of San Pedro also has a population with these characteristics. When PROMEBA was completed, the characteristics of this population did not change; all continued in the same way. Thus, we decided to do something about it. The idea was to organise a micro-entrepreneurship in order to create jobs and generate incomes. We formulated the project and the National Ministry of Social Development approved the financing. It began to build what would be the future micro-entrepreneurship headquarters and procedures for acquiring the necessary equipment began.

However, the hard problem was acquiring the participation of people and the mayor and training for the future micro-entrepreneurship. We then decided to summon the neighbours to a meeting to begin working on the issue. Only 22 women interested in participating in the project came. However, we started with the training. At the beginning, they did not participate. Then, approaching women, we got into a position of equals and sat down to informally chat in order to break the silence and to listen to them. We discovered that they did not participate because they felt great shame. Some felt shame due to not knowing how to read or write. Some had not finished primary studies. Some, according to them, did not know how to 'speak well' since they spoke in Portuguese mixed with Spanish. Some did not want to speak because

they were missing a tooth or two. Thus, we changed the contents of the course and talked about rights, territoriality, citizenship and social equality. We prepared audiovisual material for the next workshop and we continued with these themes, but added others: gender, patriarchy, power and social subjects. Then, we talked about the social economy, jobs and income redistribution. At the same time, we got teachers to teach reading and writing to women, and so they finished primary school. We also used a national dental campaign to repair their missing teeth.

The women took over the project and distributed the tasks and responsibilities. In a collective workshop, it was decided to create a work cooperative. The women named it 'Araucaria', in honour of the araucaria pines. The cooperative began to work regularly. The activities were very intensive. Two of the women who exercised leadership in the group decided to participate in politics. In the general elections of 2011, these two women presented as candidates for the municipal Parliament. After this process, we dissociated from the project by completing our work. From the emancipatory social work perspective, we generated processes of emancipation in these women and created the conditions that made their construction as social subjects and social actors possible. Those moments of self-consciousness and embarrassment were far away, such as the fears, the complexes related to speaking, the incomplete primary education and the missing teeth. The processes of emancipation that liberated women from their limitations were built in two years, from 2009 to 2011, and social subjects capable of leading their own projects emerged.

Conclusions

Social intervention from the perspective of emancipatory social work denotes not only criticism and a questioning of the dominant order and the dominant rhetoric, but also, above all, making a clear commitment to transformative action. This is about implementing specific actions that generate conditions for the real and effective exercise of rights. In other words, it means acting so that things can be different in the everyday life of social subjects through the construction of identities, the redefinition of living worlds, the building of more democratic and less unequal social ties, the construction of citizenship, and, in this way, the materialising of the right to have rights.

In this daily transformation of reality, greater social changes are being developed. In these social micro-spaces, great projects, political leaderships, social movements, ideologies and social representation are being created. All around these social micro-spaces power circulates and knowledge and grids of social meanings are being built. It is in these social micro-spaces that the social workers can really and effectively carry out a transformative praxis that creates the conditions for social emancipation.

In conclusion, we endorse Concepción Nieves Ayús's words:

For millions of inhabitants of the planet: humble workers; marginalized, discriminated, dispossessed and oppressed people; and progressive forces struggling for a more just and better world, human emancipation is an aspiration that is alive maintained (Ayús, 2005:198)

It is a legitimate inspiration that comes from oppression and domination, and whose main challenge is the overcoming of the capitalist mode of production, patriarchy

and neocolonialism. It is not just an aspiration, but a deep demand for social justice and the recognition of human beings as social subjects capable of deciding their own destiny and carrying out projects of life.

Notes

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