

# Three Generations

FEMINISM is the one bridge that spans the GENERATION GAPS between THREE Argentinian WOMEN.

by Mavic Cabrera Balleza



**C**ool. The young woman in a denim mini-skirt and white T-shirt walked into the room where Isis's Breathing Feminism in Media Workshop at the 1995 NGO Forum on Women was taking place. She was with two other women but it was she who immediately caught my attention because in such meetings, one rarely sees or meets women under 30. Lest I be charged of ageism, let it be clear that I don't have anything against middle-aged women who often dominate feminist gatherings. But it is also interesting, apart from refreshing, to listen to young women and examine their perspective.

As I was already curious who she was, I immediately approached her after the workshop to introduce myself and tell her about our work in Isis. Needless to say, I also drew out the same information from her. Networking, as we call it in our jargon-laden NGO world, really means nothing more than plain and simple introductions and getting-to-know-yous.

Cool was Erika Bordenave. Erika came to Beijing to take part in the World Conference on Women and its parallel NGO Forum with her mother Marcela and grandmother Elena. They are the three generations of Bordenave women in whose blood feminism seems to run naturally.

Attending women's conferences is a common activity for the Bordenave women—particularly in their native country Argentina. However, the magnitude of the World Conference on Women, let alone the fact that it took place in Beijing, a setting that is equally exciting as the processes that led to it, made the Women's Conference a historic gathering for the three. Just like any of the more than 30,000 women and a few brave men, Erika, Marcela and Elena have looked forward to this mammoth gathering since the first official publicity came out more than three years ago.

**E**lena, who does not quite look her 71 years, was a teacher who rose from the ranks to become a supervisor and, later, director in the Argentinean Education Department. One who can be called a woman ahead of her time, Elena was already a feminist long before the so-called bra burners made it in the news. Elena defines her feminism as the struggle for women's liberation both at the workplace and in a relationship. She grows pensive as she recalls the time when they organized the first trade union of women teachers in the 1950s. At that time, Argentinean women did not have much choice. If one was a wife, she just had to conform and do her wifely duties. That was all that was

"While Argentina is repairing the damages of the past 20 years, it is not doing anything about the human rights situation today. I'm against the government but I'm working there because I'm a human rights advocate."  
- Erika



expected of an Argentinian woman: get married, take care of a husband, and raise a family. "I think I have been exceptionally lucky because I was able to concentrate on my career without pressures from my husband," Elena stresses appreciatively.

**T**wenty-two-year-old Erika is a secretary at the Human Rights Department in Argentina. Part of her work is documenting the victims of human rights violations during the military government's rule. The families of those who disappeared and those who were imprisoned during the military regime are being indemnified by the present government. "I'm not so glad about this because while we are repairing the damages of the past 20 years, we are not doing anything about the human rights situation today. I'm against the government but I'm working there because I'm a human rights advocate. I want to draw attention to the police repression against young people that is happening today since these are the same things that happened 20 years ago.

"My work in the Human Rights Department complements my involvement in the women's movement. They are interconnected. Women's rights are also human rights," Erika adds.

The most publicly visible of the three, Marcela, is an incumbent member of the Argentinian Parliament where she represents the province of Buenos Aires. A former English teacher, Marcela is also a seasoned trade unionist. At present, she coordinates the women's committee of *Congreso de los Trabajadores Argentinos* (Argentinian Workers' Congress).

### **Issues of the Past and the Present**

Looking back at what she calls their highly traditional era, Elena believes education or the lack of it was the main issue of women during their time. Limited access to education gave women very limited choices. When women reached a certain age, they were expected to get married and soon after raise a family without even considering if that is really what they want to do with their lives. Neither

did they give any thought to the consequences of their decisions.

In contrast, many Argentinian women nowadays prefer not to get married because of the strong patriarchal nature of this Latino society. Even as women head 33 percent of Argentinian households, equality remains the issue since it is still the men who have the final say.

Elena says she lived in interesting times. In those days, the issue for them who belonged to the middle class was whether to accept Peronism. The only initiative to involve women in the public sphere came from Evita, President Peron's wife, who did nothing more than rally Argentinian women to support the President. Even in the anti-Peron movement where Elena belonged, women's rights and issues were not articulated.

Young Erika, on the other hand, considers the issues of racism and reproductive rights as the main issues that the women's movement should focus on. She says: "Argentina is a very racist society. If you're not blond or blue-eyed, you have a problem. Abortion is illegal in my country. But I think that women should be allowed to decide on their own. And of course, we want to be a part of the society and we want to be treated like human beings.

"While there seems to be more equality now," Erika continues, "in reality, Argentinian society still is very macho. Latino guys are still very macho because that is the way they were brought up—they have their macho fathers as role models. I think the issues confronted by my grandmother's as well as my mother's generations are still the same issues that we are confronting now. This is why young people should keep struggling to set their own people free. This is why we should continue to struggle to eliminate racial and gender discrimination."

Marcela agrees with Erika's view that abortion must be legalized. She says the fact that Argentina is a predominantly Catholic country and groups like the Opus Dei are very influential poses some problems for women fighting for reproductive freedom. But apart from reproductive rights, Marcela believes that there should be greater participation of women

Marcela, Erika, and Elena—feminists all.

in politics. Political participation, according to Marcela, will enable women to attain equality.

"It is not enough just to have women's committees in every chapter of the union especially because there is also a lot of discrimination in trade unions. So plans for a program to train women union members to assert and speak for their rights are on the drawing board," says Marcela. She hopes that more women will take an active part in the Argentinian Workers' Congress, which is composed of different trade unions. She sees Congress as a venue for democratic processes that the Argentinian government has failed to provide.

The other crucial issue, Marcela believes, is violence against women. Like anywhere else in the world, domestic violence is a major issue in Argentina especially now that the unemployment rate is continually rising. Marcela underscores the gravity of the problem: "Unemployed men become terribly insecure. A simple misunderstanding often leads to violence in the home. There is a correlation between economic problems and violence."

Because of this, Marcela is part of a group that seeks to amend a law on domestic violence. "The law is very convoluted. It is not clear how a guilty man is penalized or if he is penalized at all. I believe the punishment should be rationalized. When someone kills a person, he is punished, right? I think if a man kills his wife, he should get a heavier punishment," Marcela explains.

### **Gains and Milestones**

Erika's eyes glow with pride when she talks of the 30 percent reserved seat for women in the parliament. As her mother and grandmother nod approvingly, she says women's groups worked hard for the quota to be implemented.

Marcela thinks that it is already a big achievement that women are now accomplishing things on their own and speaking out for themselves. As an example, she talks about peasant and middle-class women who protested the eviction of peasant families from their homes after the creation of agroregions by the government.

Argentinian women also initiated a successful immunization campaign against meningitis, which, in Argentina, says Marcela, is widespread. "The vaccine for this disease is very expensive and the state has been remiss in providing such basic health needs. In some areas, it is the women's groups that provided children with free immunization."

### **Feminist Development**

Elena credits her exposure in the academe as instrumental in her development as a feminist. She did a lot of work to make young women and men understand that relationships should not be male-dominated and that women caught in such situations have the option to leave the relationship.

The feminist motto that the personal is political could not be more apt for Marcela. She singles out her experience as a battered wife as the key to her feminist awakening. In the '70s, Marcela and her husband were active in the *Militantes* party. Much of their work was campaigning against General Alejandro Lanusse's military government that ousted Peron. Marcela remembers thinking that their marriage was working quite well and that there was trust and there seemed to be equality. She did not feel discriminated against until her husband started beating her, a nightmare that lasted 12 years. "I couldn't leave him, it was a difficult time in Argentina. Well, I actually left him many times but I would always come back because of the children. I thought I could let it pass. His being a militant party member seemed more important to me."

In 1976, with her two little children in tow, Marcela and her husband fled to Mexico to escape prosecution by the military regime. They lived in exile until 1982. "I was not battered during our exile and I trusted that someday he will stop beating me. When we returned to Argentina after the dictatorship fell, he went back to his old ways. I decided that it was over."

Like her mother, Erika confesses to being a survivor of domestic violence. "There was a time when my husband almost killed me. However, it took me only four years instead of 12 to decide to leave him. But even without the



Despite differences in personal politics, Elena, above, and Marcela, below, are positive influences on each other.

"I want to help women run away from an abusive relationship as quickly as possible, find a safe shelter where they can analyze their situation and then decide for themselves without pressure from anyone."  
- Marcela

difficult experiences like we had, I guess every woman should be a feminist." Erika attributes her feminist development to her mother and grandmother.

### Directions

With the Beijing Conference and with governments forging a new agreement to advance the status of women, Marcela believes that women all over the world are facing a crucial moment. "Although we understand that the women's movement is so diverse, we should be as organized as we can. Conservatism is on the rise and there is a lot of pressure from fundamentalist groups. Taking the issue of reproductive rights as an example, we should be able to impress upon the Vatican that our rights are non-negotiable. Moreover, we should be able to show them that women can make a difference for the better. The United Nations for instance has been in existence for the last 50 years; yet, it hasn't been able to put a stop to even one single war. We should do better than that. Let us show the governments, the international bodies, women and men, that while we are meeting and talking, we are also accomplishing something."

Last 10 December, Marcela's political



Doing things together.

party, the *Frente para un País Solidario* (Coalition for Mutual Solidarity) presented a package of bills on women's issues, on the drug problem and on labor issues. As a member of the Congressional Committee on Family, Women and Minority, she proposed a shelter program for victims of domestic violence.

"I want to help women run away from an abusive relationship as quickly as possible, find a safe shelter where they can analyze their situation and then decide for themselves without pressure from anyone."

### Intergenerational Dialogue

As I listened to the three Bordenave women tell their stories, I was awed by how each one influenced the other, despite personal politics and despite generation gaps.

From being a staunch anti-Peron activist, Elena made a 180-degree turn to become a Peronist, perhaps partly because of Marcela's involvement in anti-Lanusse campaigns. Marcela, meanwhile, reflects: "I was active in the trade unions and I witnessed how Peron's policies provided greater economic and social benefits for the working class. Whereas in my mother's time, only the so-called excesses of Evita were magnified. The repression that we experienced under the military regime of General Alejandro Lanusse made my mother realize that things were a lot better under Peron. But I've always respected my mom even at that time when she took a political stance that was completely opposite mine."

"Through them [Marcela and Erika], I clearly see all the social changes that are taking place. It makes it easier for me to accept changes which I thought would never happen," Elena points out.

Erika, the youngest Bordenave, gratefully acknowledges the elder women's influence in her life. "We discuss a lot, we travel together, we do things together. My grandmother gives me books and other reading materials. My mother, on the other hand, brings me to places and takes me along to conferences and lobby work. She gives me the courage to speak and decide for myself. I would say that my grandmother provides me the theories while my mother provides me the opportunity to put the theories into practice." ?