

Aqua-Feminism

**Water Privatization and Sustainable Development:
Insights from a Gender Perspective
A case study on Buenos Aires**



Picture: <http://sweb.ws>

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Abstract

The privatization of water and sanitation services in Buenos Aires was one of the biggest cases in the whole world. Fourteen years since the initiation of the concession to Aguas Argentinas, and after the return to the State ownership in 2006, much has been said about the privatization, its outcomes, implications and significance.

This work aims at giving a contribution to the debate by applying a gender perspective to the analysis of the phenomenon.

This work is an attempt to contribute to bridge the gap between the discussion about gender and water and the debate water privatization. To do this, the insights from the analysis of relevant gender literature are the lenses through which the effects of the privatization in the specific case of Buenos Aires are examined. In practical terms, to apply a gender perspective meant – for this work – not to utilize the household as atomic and indivisible analytical element, but to explore the intra-household sphere, assessing differential impacts and dynamics for the members, analyzing the distribution of benefits and costs among the household components, implied by the privatization, and seen in their interplay with the gendered structures at the basis of the social fabric.

The empirical evidence from the fieldwork (which consisted of interviews with informants and with women of different social class belonging) confirms the complexity of the different realities that the development of gender structures in the Argentinean society has originated – a theme broader than the only water privatization. Nevertheless, the evidence from the study indicates that even the macro level of the delineation of water resource management shows clear gender differential effects, and that it is urgent to design non gender-blind policies. The connection between economical structures and gender inequality, and insights from the eco-feminist tradition suggest that, when patriarchal structure of oppression are still largely prevalent, privatization might exacerbate, via the exclusion from water and sanitation services and some implications of the private management, an exacerbation of the female members of the households belonging to marginalized social strata.

It is suggested to include gender among the criteria for the definition of priorities in the management and provision of water, and to exploit the potentiality of improving the condition to access to water not only for the sake of the quality of life of the population, but also in order promote positive dynamics for women's emancipation.

Keywords: water privatization, water management, gender and household, gender and water, gender and environment, intersectionality, sustainable development

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List of Acronyms and Abbreviations

| | |
|-----------------|--|
| AASA | Aguas Argentinas Sociedad Anónima |
| AYSA | Aguas y Saneamiento Argentino Sociedad Anónima |
| CEDAW | Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women |
| CESCR | Covenant on Economic, Social and Economic Rights |
| CF | Capital Federal |
| ETOSS | Ente Tripartito de Obras y Servicios Sanitarios |
| GBA | Gran Buenos Aires |
| GWA | Gender and Water Alliance |
| ICWE | International Conference on Water and the Environment |
| ILO | International Labour Organization |
| IMF | International Monetary Found |
| INDEC | Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Censos |
| NGO | Non-Governmental Organization |
| OSN | Obras Sanitarias de la Nacion |
| UNECOSOC | United Nations Economic and Social Council |
| UNESCO | United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization |
| UNDP | United Nations Development Project |
| UNSD | United Nations Statistics Division |
| USD | United States Dollar |
| WHO | World Health Organization |
| WID | Women In Development |

1. Introduction

Some thoughts about water privatization, gender and sustainability

1.1 Sustainable Development, an intriguing marriage

The concept of sustainability has gained an immense relevance in the international arena in the last decades, and the union of the two words *sustainable* and *development* has gained an existence of its own, and a broad semantic background. Many valid attempts to clearly define the meaning and implication of the concept have been done, and this is not the occasion to dive into the question. However, in order to introduce this work, it is useful, once again and only briefly, to look at the two words separately, as if it were the first time one met the concept of sustainable development and one wanted to understand why just those two words are united in such an important marriage. The fission of the term will help to enlighten the relevance of water privatization in the discussion on sustainable development.

The word *sustainable* recalls of a long-term perspective, of something meant to last longer than just in the immediate time, something that in its way of functioning does not undermine the conditions for its own future existence and operation. The thought rapidly runs to the interaction between humans and the *Earth*, *Nature*, or in more austere words the ecosystems and ‘ecosystem services’ (Costanza et al. 1997) that constitute the vital support for human life and activities on this planet. The extent and intensity of the influence and manipulation exercised by humans on the ecosystems has reached a level that does not anymore allow considering the earth as ‘infinite’. The ‘human system’ has got very close – if not beyond¹ - to the limits imposed by the ecosystems, to the carrying capacity of the earth. As effectively underscored by Herman Daly, the very conceptualization of the interaction and relative sizes of human and ecological systems has to be considered and re-considered in reason of the extent and intensity of the influence exercised by humans on natural resources and ecosystems (1996). History has in many points shown strains in the relationship between civilizations and the environment that sustains them (Ponting 1992), but the present capacity of humans to influence – and harm – ecosystems is unprecedented, at least on the global scope of the issue. Phenomena as the ozone hole, depletion of fish stocks or climate change represent a loud call for a sustainable interaction between humans and nature, a relationship that does not undercut the future existence of humanity and ecosystems.

The definition of the word *development* has been the battlefield for numerous ideological and academic disputes. Development used to be a proxy for economic development, and used to be consequently measured as a function of economic growth. The concept of development might be defined as the struggle/path away from the “unfreedoms” that limit humans lives, as poverty, hunger, illness and deprivation in general (Sen 1999). Others might see development as the advance of the modern patterns of life and production beyond the backwardness of the dark past.

Other voices connote development in less positive terms, some as the expansion/conquest by the Western models of social and economic systems of the whole world, a bottom-down process where the ‘undeveloped world’ (what is politely called developing world) undergoes changes forced by the overwhelming political, economic and military strength of the developed world (Shiva 1989; Latouche 1993; Mies 1999). Nevertheless, even standpoints critical of ‘development’ in its present dominant connotation, propose alternatives connected to the semantics of the word development, i.e. a process of improvement of the present situation (recognized as plagued by problems) for the sake of humanity and ecosystems.

¹ As indicated e.g. by the Ecological Footprint

The marriage inherits the scope and potentiality, but also the strains and clashes, the defects of the two spouses. Sustainable development is the matrimony of hopes and concerns, and can be seen as the striving for a path of improvement of the human conditions inside the ecological limits. At the same time, sustainable development implies sharp conflicts between the different goals contained under the broad ‘umbrella’ of sustainability. The ‘ecological needs’ and the needs for liberating humanity from its “unfreedoms” not always find an easy way to go hand in hand, and different solutions and paths conflict on the best balance among the different factors at play.

A strong voice of dissent is Vandana Shiva’s, who claims that “sustainable development is the conversion of an ecological crisis into a market of scarce resources”(2002: 88). The disagreement does not lie on whether to achieve economically sustainable paths of development or not, and the limitedness of the available resources is not questioned. Shiva discusses how to deal with the limits imposed by ‘nature’. Shiva criticizes two aspects that she connects to the dominant meaning of sustainable development, related to the definition of priorities and of the ‘optimal’ allocation of the available resources. This type of critique rejects the opportunity to delegate to market mechanisms these two functions (definition of priority and allocation of resources) in the global context, plagued by inequity and injustice, and threatened by the pressure exercised on the ecosystems. Two factors lie behind the critiques. First, the very conceptualization of nature and natural resources as goods is criticized, and presented as an expression of a bi-folded form of oppression, by humans on humans (read the hegemony of the ‘first world’) and by humans on nature² (Shiva 1989, 2002). More practically, it is questioned that markets and the principles of modern capitalism are suitable to combine an efficient use of the available resources and the avoidance of excluding mechanisms originate marginalizes groups.

1.2 Water: a mirror of Sustainable Development and its strains

Few things represent as fully as water the issues, strains and opportunities that come to the surface with the intersection of the human sphere and the environment. Water is clearly a fundamental element of any ecosystem, the building block of any form of life on earth. The catastrophic consequences of disruptive anthropogenic intervention on the hydrological cycle and the degradation of water resources, clearly indicate the importance of a sound management and usage of water, of sustainable practices of water usage, practices able to deal both with the increasing human needs for water and with the finite nature of this element (see e.g. ICWE 1992). From an anthropocentric viewpoint, water is a prerequisite for the biological survival of human beings, as well as a non-replaceable ground for most economical activities, as agriculture and food provision, transports, sanitation. In spite of the centrality of water for the human life, and the fact that it is a necessary prerequisite for the enjoyment of basic human rights, more than one billion people do not have a safe access to water , and an enormous number of deaths are due to lack of access to safe water sources (UNESCO 2003; WHO 2003; UNDP 2005).

The question is therefore how to achieve universal access to safe water and to satisfy the needs of the growing world population, maintaining the amount of consumed water below the limits imposed by ecosystem. As well as how to do that with the limited economic resources that are available. The dilemma mirrors the strains and tensions that characterize the debate on sustainability, presents no settled ‘best-solution’ and competing lines of thought support different options.

Among the options for the management of water (and of other natural resources), *privatization and private participation* have acquired an increased relevance in the academic and political debate in the last

² A similar point can be found in Carolyn Merchant’s (1989) and in Karen Warren’s (2000) theories.

decades. Privatization in general has occupied many debaters and scholars under a long period and it has represented one of the recipes to deal with underdevelopment.

The basic ideas behind water privatization are the same as those presented to support privatization in general. The alleged benefits of private participation in terms of capital collection (a central issue in the capital intensive water sector), the efficiency of the private sector and the faith in the remuneration obtainable from an extension of markets are 'traditional' arguments (Finger and Allouche 2002; Gleick et al. 2002). The scarcity (or at least limitedness) of water, combined with growing world population and water needs, makes many argue for water privatization as an antidote to Hardin's tragedy of the commons³, and as way to optimally administer the scarce resource through the mechanisms of economical pricing (Rogers et al. 2002). The neo-liberal-rooted faith in privatization has therefore an open field in the case of water. Given the factors above it can seem straightforward to endorse the assumption that markets, trade and private enterprise are the best guarantee for an efficient – and thus sustainable, is argued – management and allocation of scarce resources, in general, and water, especially.

The case of water privatization is, if possible, even more controversial than privatization in general, and discloses a number of different questions. It takes to the surface the strains that in general water management presents. The conceptualization of water assumes a central importance in the definition of the paths to follow in order to provide water for humans and to protect the water stocks and ecosystems dependent on them. Competing ideological, academic and political standpoints give very different answers. The 'same water' can be conceptualized as a commodity, as an ecological good, or even as a spiritual and cultural element (Mehta 2000; Rogers et al. 2002; Shiva 2002).

Supporters of water privatization and disciples of the neo-liberal doctrine argue for the necessity to treat water as a commodity, a good to be exchanged as any other scarce good, in the faith that market mechanisms will provide the most efficient allocation of the limited available amounts of water (see e.g. James Winpenny's standpoint as exposed in Finger and Allouche 2002: 41, or ; Rogers et al. 2002). However, not only neo-liberals support the conceptualization of water as an economic good: this view has gained a shared, almost general consensus. The International Conference on Water and the Environment (ICWE) held in Dublin in 1992 formulated an assertion that gained a high resonance and influence. The Principle 4 of the so called Dublin Statement affirms that "water should be recognized as an economic good", also noting that "past failure to recognize the economic value of water has led to wasteful and environmentally damaging uses of the resource". The Gender and Water Alliance – an organization far from being a neo-liberal think-tank – underscores the importance to consider water as an economic good as a principle of water management, and emphasizes the need for water services to be considered as economic activities and be paid for (GWA 2006: 8).

At the same time, even if accenting the issue to different levels, everyone acknowledges that water is a fundamental human need. The General Comment to the well known Covenant on Economic, Social and Economic Rights effectively declares the importance of water not only per se:

Water is a limited natural resource and a public good fundamental for life and health. The human right to water is indispensable for leading a life in human dignity. It is a prerequisite for the realization of other human rights (UNCESCR, 2002)

³ Nevertheless, Hardin's analysis and conclusions have been seriously questioned, in particular by highlight the difference between open-access resources and commons, a distinction very pertinent in the case of water (for a discussion of the topic, see Carlsson 2003).

Many argue that the human dependency on water for *surviving* should imply water to be treated as a human right (Gleick 1998; Shiva 2002; WHO 2003). As expressed by Scanlon et al.: “the human right to water exists, as water is the most essential element of life, ... this right has not been clearly defined in international law and has not been expressly recognized as a fundamental human right” (2004: 12), and actual steps have been done in this direction. Among international legally binding treaties only the Convention on the Rights of Child and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) sanction the right to access to water (Scanlon et al.: 5). Nevertheless, several non-binding but influential international declarations recognize the universal access to water as a fundamental human right and as a condition for sustainability, as e.g. The Stockholm Declaration (1972), Agenda 21 (1992) and the Johannesburg Declaration on Sustainable Development (2002) (Scanlon et al.: 7).

The paragraphs above thus highlight one of the main strains in the discussion about water management (a common thread in sustainability), i.e. how to conciliate the limitedness of water and its status as human right, or at least as basic human need⁴. The effects of privatization and of the commodification of water on the disadvantaged strata of the population have raised many concerns and strong opposition. How market mechanisms affect the weak and to which extent market mechanisms can contribute to protect the environment are open questions, a field of fierce debate. What are the implications of considering water as a scarce *economic* good? Does scarcity imply the commodification of water? Where is the contact point between the notion of water as a commodity and the fact that water is a basic need? Is it correct, morally right or acceptable, even reasonable to treat water as a commodity? A glance at the answers ‘on the table’ shows that the debate is not settled at all, and each of the questions – and many others – represents an interesting field of research, and could occupy the work for a whole thesis.

1.3 A Gender Perspective on water and sustainability

In my work, I chose to take an indirect way, not digging directly into any of the single questions. My work is an attempt to reframe the problem, before worrying about providing direct answers. This work assesses the phenomenon of water privatization from a *gender perspective*. There should be no need to justify why an analysis through ‘gender lenses’ is needed and useful, and very often urgent. Many conventions and statements of political aims testify to the need to free women from their disadvantaged position (see e.g. the Millennium Development Goals), and ‘gender mainstreaming’ has become an imperative in the operations of governmental bodies and international organizations. The category “women” is not free from problems⁵ (Ramazanoglu 2002; De los Reyes and Mulinari 2005), and this work takes a ‘problematizing’ approach to the issue (see section 9.2.1). However, it is still true that women represent a marginalized/weak ‘macro-group’. Women account for about 70% of the world’s poor, and are often relegated in a subordinate position in respect to men. In the eloquent words of Nandita Singh, women “represent a marginalized group in society who experience gross inequalities of formal power and authority in the public sphere and are denied equal access to and control over resources” (2006:64).

⁴ The differentiation may sound as a fussiness, but the political implications of the recognition of water as a human right would/could be profound, even in practical terms, see the discussion about it in Scanlon et al. (2004), WHO (2003) and Gleick (1998).

⁵ Aware of the theoretical and ideological problems connected to the category ‘women’ (see e.g. Mohanty 1997), it is urgent to declare that it will be utilized in a descriptive rather than normative fashion, considering women as a group at least in reason of the forms of common oppression that women as such suffer (see the discussion in chapter 9.2.1).

The existence of gender-selective structures of exclusion is found even in the access to water (WHO 2003; UNDP 2005; GWA 2006). Women are in many parts of the world the main responsible household member for water provision, spend – in comparison to men – disproportionately higher amounts of time collecting water, and in many cases bear the largest costs of scarcity, high prices, and bad quality of water. The gender-based disparity in the water sector is not limited to the aspects above. Quoting Singh once again, women often enjoy a limited “access to water resources and benefits from water development projects as well as [in the] exercise of decision making powers with respect to the management of these resources” (Singh 2006).

A gender analysis of the issue should not be limited to the recognition of women’s different usage of and rights to water, or to the immediate effects of water privatization on women. The origin of women’s over-exposure to water related issues can hardly be individuated by an ‘algebraic’ and undifferentiated calculation of costs and benefits at the household or societal level. In fact, it crucial to treasure the insights that gender studies and feminist theories provide, and to analyze the issue by addressing the particular form of discrimination in the frame of the oppressive mechanisms and conceptualizations hidden by economical and social structures.

The scope of a gender perspective is broader than to include (one might say free) women, ‘to give women a voice’ (Mellor 1997; Warren 2000). Using the analytical tools of gender studies offers powerful opportunities not only to address the disadvantaged conditions of women around the world, but also to assess issues from a different – and broader – point of view. The conceptualizations and paradigms built starting from a gender perspective offer in several cases comprehensive analysis and diagnosis of the mechanism that create oppressive structures, connecting marginalization of women to the oppression of other human groups and to ideologies and practices of (unsustainable) exploitation of nature⁶. Thus, scrutinizing development and sustainable development (both as concepts and as historical phenomena) with gender lenses has the potentiality to question the framework of the discussion and, to a certain extent, may involve a re-thinking of the categories used in the conceptualization of the issues. It is therefore hard to deny that in the water sector and in the broader ambit of sustainable development – a tangled battle among interconnected interests, subjects and spheres – the chance to re-frame questions and to integrate alternative perspectives can lead to more acceptable and, daring to use the term, better solutions.

2. The Research Process

2.1 Research Objectives and Structure of the work

The main questions the present work addresses are:

- What are the consequences of water privatization from a gender perspective? In other words, what are the effects if the household is not the unit of analysis, but one looks at intra-household dynamics, with special attention to gendered differences?
- Are there different effects for women and men?
- How can the issue be connected to the theoretical discussion about gender, sustainable development, and water management? How do different theoretical paradigms explain what seen in reality?

⁶ Some examples of such theoretical frameworks are give by Mary Mellor (1997), Karen Warren (2000), Carolyn Merchant (1989), Vandana Shiva (1989), Maria Mies (1999)

In order to address these questions the present work is divided into two main parts. Part I presents the results of a fieldwork in Buenos Aires; it gives a brief overview of the privatization in Buenos Aires, introduces the women's situation in the country, and reports from the interviews done in the city. Part II deepens some theoretical issue related to water privatization, water and gender, analyzing answers to the question proposed by different schools of thought. This is done with special attention to the insights obtained by the fieldwork and trying to connect the empirical evidence to relevant theories and paradigms.

2.2 A qualitative and reflexive research

Qualitative or quantitative methods? The dilemma has an important role in the design of a research process, and has been a clear border among different disciplines and epistemological orientations (Bryman 2004). The decision here was to opt for a qualitative approach, more appropriate to answering the questions behind this research. The qualitative approach was not chosen "as all that is not quantitative" (Brockington and Sullivan 2003: 159), but since it was reputed to allow the deepening of the comprehension of the effects at the intra-household level of the privatization of water, and its *perception* among the concerned people. The objective of this work is not to provide any statistically relevant evidence generalized in strict terms, but to provide a deeper knowledge about the situation of life (with special attention to water) of common women, and to unveil the connections between privatization, access to water and the gendered structures at the intra-household level. Nevertheless, no ostracism is made against quantitative data, which is used (see the secondary sources in chapters 4 and 5) as support to and frame for the qualitative material collected in the fieldwork.

It is worth to discuss the relationship between the fieldwork (Part I) and the theory (Part II). The 'standard' interpretation is that qualitative methods are chosen when using an inductive approach – to generate theories from empirical evidence – and quantitative methods are employed in deductive research – to test theories (Brockington and Sullivan 2003: 157; Bryman 2004: 19-21). However, according to Bryman, "it is necessary to be careful about hammering a wedge between them" (2004: 20), between qualitative and quantitative methodologies, and between induction and deduction. The goal of this work was not to generate any theory, but to relate the specificity of the case to the more general discussion and paradigms. This approach constitutes a hybrid, neither purely inductive nor deductive, close to the "reflexive methodology" presented by Alvesson and Skoldberg (2000). The strategy followed in this work refuses a unidirectional hierarchy between the empirical and the theoretical, refusing both a purely inductive and a purely deductive method. The focus is on a flexible process of research, which presents multi-directional communication and interplay between the empirical and the theoretical spheres (*ibid*).

2.3 Materials

The two parts of the work rely on the use of different materials. In Part I, chapters 3, 4 and 5 depart mainly from a review of publications about the topic, therefore using mainly secondary sources. Nevertheless, two interviews with informants integrate the analysis of secondary sources. Informants provide useful insights of the context on which the research is done, contributing to enrich the understanding of the case of concern (Yin 2003: 90). With this goal was interviewed Horacio Seillant, who headed the governmental team for the renegotiation of the contract with Aguas Argentinas, in order to get a lively 'view' and review about the process of privatization in its overall features and character. Marisù Devoto,

president of the Fundación Propuesta⁷, was interviewed in order to complete the overall picture of the women's situation in Argentina.

Ying, in parallel with highlighting the valuable role of informants, warns on a serious risk connected to the role of informants, i.e. “the interpersonal influence ... that the informant may have” on the researcher (2003: 90). This risk was avoided not only by fronting the conversations with informants aware of the danger, but also by conducting those interviews only after a thorough consultation of secondary sources, in order to meet the informants when already doted of a well-grounded understanding of the situation.

Chapters 6 and 7 present and analyze the empirical material collected during the fieldwork in Buenos Aires (for a discussion of the methodology of the interviews, see chapter 6.1)

Part II integrates the insights obtained in the fieldwork from the Gran Buenos Aires case (Part I) with an analysis of peer-reviewed literature about the topics of gender, development and water.

2.4 Male and European: an issue?

A European, male researcher interviewing women in a shantytown in Buenos Aires. This picture of my fieldwork seems to fit the description of the critical research situation painted by Scheyvens et al. (2003). Conducting research with persons “much poorer than you ... or with lower class women” (ibid: 167) is a practice that need some methodological (and even ethical) caution. The different position (social, economic, etc.) of interviewer and interviewees might create an unbalanced power relation in the process of research (ibid). This might result in the interviewee ‘covering’ the respondents’ voice and devaluating their knowledge, because of an alleged ‘superiority’ felt by the researcher, or because of the different approaches to communication and analysis of reality (ibid). A specific issue has to be taken into account being a male researcher interviewing lower class women, i.e. the risk of not overcoming the roles and rules imposed by patriarchal structures, which very often shape the forms of socializations and expression ‘allowed’ for men and women (ibid). This might represent not only an ethical problem concerning the respondents’ integrity, but also a hinder to the establishment of an effective an open communication.

The ‘legitimacy’ of the research is another serious issue. Is this work another example of a “men speaking for women” (Scheyvens et al. 2003: 170), after “centuries of ignoring women’s ideas altogether or having men speaking for women [?]” (Reinharz quoted in Scheyvens et al. 2003: 167). The answer to the last question is probably more of an ethical/ideological kind than an academic matter. The author opted to try to avoid the perils represented by the issue. This statement should not at all be read as a denial of the problem, but should be interpreted as the ‘open’ declaration of an ethical evaluation done by the author⁸. In order to reduce the exposed risk, the work was performed by the author being aware of the risks, and by seriously taking into account the issue before, during and after the fieldwork (see chapter 6.1).

⁷ Fundación Propuesta is an NGO supporting women victims of violence and providing different type of foemation courses.

⁸ It is out of the scope of this work to deepen the discussion of the topic. An exhortation not to underestimate the issue can be found also if the situation of a male researcher interviewing lower class women is analyzed taking into account the implications of the concepts of positionality of research and of standpoint in feminists studies (for a discussion of the two concepts see e.g. Ramazanoglu 2002)

Part I -The Buenos Aires Case

Part I presents the results of the fieldwork carried out in the city of Buenos Aires. Chapter 3 gives some information about Buenos Aires, chapter 4 present an historical overview of the process of privatization in Buenos Aires, inserting it into the context of the changes that took place in Argentina during the 90s. Chapter 5 provides a sketch of the women’s situation in Argentina and its evolution during the period of interest (the decade of the 90s). Chapters 6 and 7 report and discuss the results of interviews performed during the fieldwork. Chapter 8 presents some conclusions for Part I.

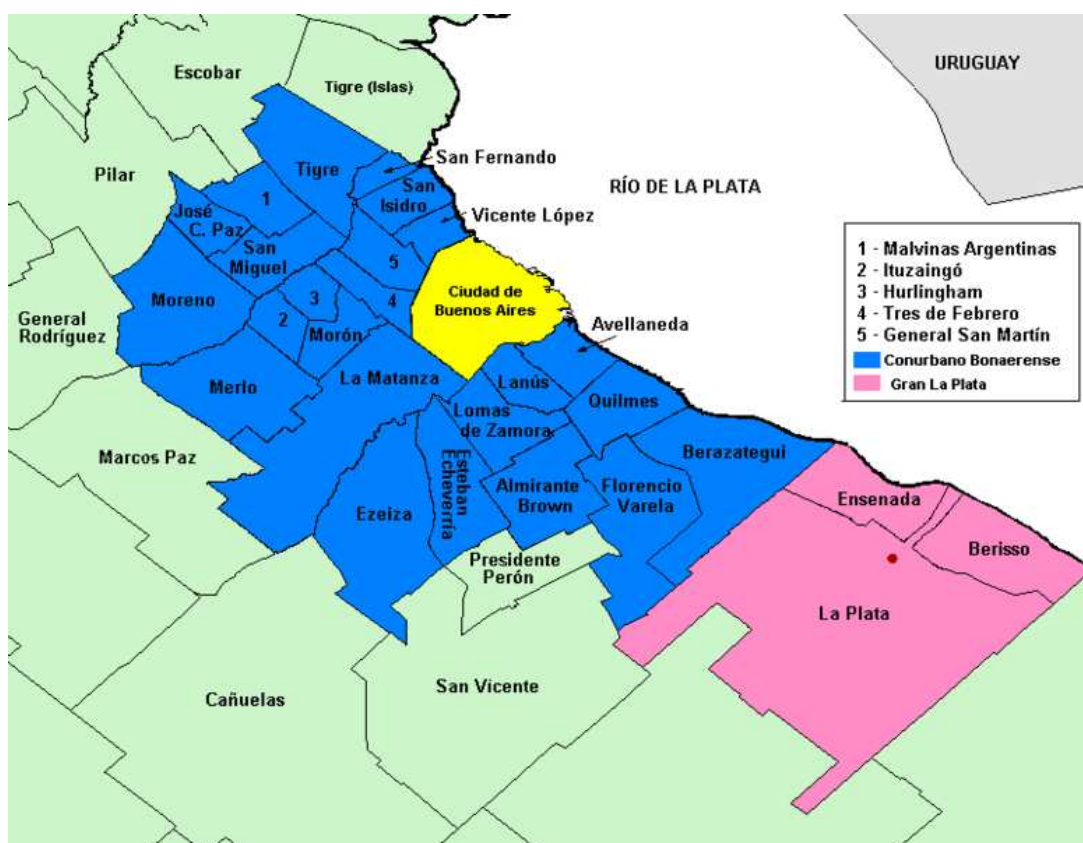


Figure 1- Map of the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area

source: wikipedia

3. Buenos Aires: a huge and clustered metropolis

The metropolitan area of Buenos Aires occupies a huge territory on the delta of the river Río De la Plata. What is often referred to as Gran Buenos Aires (Greater Buenos Aires, GBA) consist of the central area, the 'city' – the *Capital Federal* (CF, Federal Capital), surrounded by the *conurbano* (suburbs), constituted by the flanking *partidos*, municipalities dotted of autonomous administrative institutions. Capital Federal has about 2,7 million inhabitants, and the *partidos* circa 8,7 million.

Gran Buenos Aires is not at all a homogeneous area. Several are the axes of separation. With the words of Bolay et al., one finds “better urban conditions and quality of life in the northern than in the southern districts, in central areas than on the outskirts, and along the main urban axes than in the intermediate, poorly accessible and poorly served areas” (2005: 632). The most evident rift is between CF and the surrounding municipalities. Observing with the eyes of a foreigner, one would say they are two separate and different ‘worlds’. The density of the buildings in CF is in general much higher than in the rest of GBA, building are

in better conditions, the holes in the streets are generally less dangerous. Even the atmosphere is not the same. The large existing gap in e.g. average income, connections to water and sewage network and unemployment just add some figures to the perception one immediately has just by at first glance (Arrossi 1996; INDEC 2007).

Even Capital Federal in itself is not homogeneous but presents areas of different character and appearance. Still more amazing is the fracture among the northern and southern neighbourhoods. The quarters in the northern parts of the city (*el Barrio Norte*) are substantially richer (and look more European) than the southern neighbourhoods (*el Barrio Sur*).

Serious socio-economical problems plague the area of Gran Buenos Aires. Just as an example, about 130 thousand people live in shanty towns in the only CF (Gobierno de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires nd), and in the partidos about 18 % of the people in 2001 could not satisfy their basic needs (INDEC 2007).

4. Water and Sewage Services in Buenos Aires: a chronological overview

In the past, the State-owned Obras Sanitarias de la Nación (OSN, National Sanitary Works) centrally managed water provision and sanitation for the whole Argentina. In 1980, the management of water and sanitation services was transferred to local authorities (provinces, municipalities and regions), and OSN kept the control over the management of water and sanitation only in CF and 13 districts in GBA (Galiani et al. 2005).

The 13-years privatization started in the early 90s, when a wave of privatizations of public utilities swept Argentina. The OSN did not constitute an exception and was privatized between 1992 and 1993. It is to note that in the 90's the decision to privatize the administration of water and sanitation services was shared by a majority of the local authorities around the country: in the second half of the 90s about 65% of Argentines were served by private water and sanitation providers (Azpiazu et al. 2005; Galiani et al. 2005).

The privatization was introduced in the form of a single concession for the whole area of operation of OSN (CF and 17 partidos), originating the world's biggest concession (Casarin et al. forthcoming 2007). According to the contract, the concessionaire was in charge of both operation of the utility and of investments for the development of the network (investments which would have been propriety of the State after the contract expiration), but were not to pay any fee for the concession and were entitled to the revenues⁹. The bidding process took place in two steps, with the presentation by the competitors first of a technical proposal, and then of a financial plan (Loftus and McDonald 2001). The first 'selection' of the competitors, which could participate to the bid, was in practice done by the concession itself. The huge dimensions of the service to provide (water and sanitation for about 13 million people, one of the biggest in the world) 'allowed' only 5 aggregates (with some of the world's 'water giants') to participate to the tender (Alcázar et al. 2002). The criterion for adjudicating the concession was the largest tariff reduction with OSN's tariff as benchmark. The Consortium Aguas Argentina S.A. (AASA in the following, of which the French Suez Lyonnaise des Eaux was the main stockholder) won offering a reduction of 26.9 % and the concession contract was signed on may 1, 1993 (Loftus and McDonald 2001).

In parallel with the privatisation of OSN, a regulatory agency, the *Ente Tripartito de Obras y Servicios Sanitarios* (ETOSS, Tripartite Authority of Sanitary Works and Services) was established, with the function

⁹ For an overview of the possible private participation schemes, see a brief outline by Mehta (2004), and a more extensive discussion by Hukka and Katko (2003)

to survey the accomplishment of the concessions conditions, represent the consumers, and check the quality of the service. The ETOSS was designed with a six members board, with representatives of the municipality of Capital Federal (nominated by the mayor), of the province (appointed by the governor of the Buenos Aires Province), and of national government (nominated by the president) (Loftus and McDonald 2001).

Several re-negotiations between the ETOSS and AASA adjusted and modified the concession contract in the course of the years. Apart from tariff changes introduced in 1994, 1998 and 2001 (ETOSS n.d.), two major renegotiations took place in 1997 and 2004.

One could individuate the origin of the problems which led to the rescission of the contract in the events of 2002, when the devaluation of the Argentinean Peso (from a ratio 1:1 to 1:4 to the USD) dramatically worsened AASA's already high exposition to foreign debts, occurrence which lead the consortium to call for major renegotiation of the concession (Azpiazu et al. 2005). Exhausting negotiations followed and lead to an agreement in May 2004 (ibid.). The disputes between the company and the government continued even after that and the contrasts lead to the abrupt rescission of the contract in March-April 2006, mainly because the lag in the fulfilment of the contractual obligations by AASA, specifically about network extension and tariffs (Decree of the Presidency No 303-2006). The rescission of the concession was accompanied by the creation, on May 17, of the State-owned utility *Aguas y Saneamiento Argentino Sociedad Anónima* (AYSA), which took over AASA's function as water and sanitation service provider (Decree of the Presidency 304-2006).

4.1 Why was OSN privatized?

Water privatization has been carried out in countries characterized by very different economical, social, political and geographical characteristics. Nevertheless, it is possible to individuate some common themes and motives that usually lie behind the privatization of the water utilities¹⁰. The following sections briefly analyze some of these common themes in the Buenos Aires context, in order both to detail the picture of the specific case and to frame it into the general scenario of water privatization.

4.1.1 Water Scarcity

The issue of water availability/scarcity and the need to 'economize' the use of water is central in the debate about water and water management: it is one of the arguments that very often motivate the decision to privatize (see e.g. Savedoff and Spiller 1999). In settings as Johannesburg, Cochabamba or Manila, where the available amount of fresh water is limited in relation to the need of the dwellers to be served, privatization has been presented as an unavoidable measure to rationalize and make efficient the water consumption, in order to achieve a sustainable usage of the available resources (Nickson and Vargas 2002; Hansen 2005; Westman 2005).

In the case of Buenos Aires, it is not even necessary to enter the merit of such arguments, since the availability of water is abundant. Historically, water has never been a limiting factor for the development and expansion of Buenos Aires, and water used to be considered an "inexhaustible resource" (Schneier-Madanés 2001: 45). Even in the long-run, the physical availability of water seems to be sufficient for the need of the metropolis. The aquifers Buenos Aires rests on are very rich of waters, and the city is situated on the west cant of the river Rio De La Plata, the flow of which is large enough to provide more than 90 % of the needed water without excessively reducing the flow or endangering the riparian ecosystems (Alcázar et al. 2002).

¹⁰ For an overview of relevant examples see e.g. Finger and Allouche (2002, ch. 5 and 6) and Hukka and Katko (2003: 25-96)

Paradoxically, the abundance of water has caused serious problems in the last decades, connected to the growing levels of the water table. One of the main causes was the extension of the water network without an equal expansion of the sewage system. The water locally extracted by the use of wells decreased (in favour of piped water from the Rio de La Plata), increasing in this way the water recharge, without a parallel augment of the discharge (without sewage systems, most of the population uses cesspools). This phenomenon has created serious problems, not only by damaging low-lying parts of buildings, but also by polluting aquifers through the diffusion of the leaks of cesspools and other sources of pollution (Ichazo 2002).

4.1.2 Management, Capitals and Population Coverage

Another common argument in favour of water privatization, which fitted the Buenos Aires case, relates to the efficiency of the management of the water and sanitation services, and to the quality of the provided service. Public utilities (i.e. the State) have in many cases shown not to achieve the goals they are expected to accomplish; concisely, with the words of Clarissa Brocklehurst “[p]ublicly run utilities in developing countries have been singularly unsuccessful in providing reliable water supply and sanitation” (quoted in Budds and McGranahan 2003: 97). The weak public performances in the provision of water services furnished strong (or at least broadly accepted) arguments for the privatization or private participation, and for relying on the contribution of private actors, with the efficiency and efficacy that they were supposed to be able to provide. The views of the WB¹¹ about public services and water resource management were, at the time of the privatization, a good example of this view, very often in line with the neo-liberal recipes. A withdrawal of the state from the role of provider of those services was presented as necessary, being the State seen as unable to provide the financial and managerial resources to guarantee the development of functioning services (Idelovitch and Ringskog 1995; Finger and Allouche 2002).

The situation of OSN before privatization provided room for such privatization-positive and state-skeptical arguments. The quality of the service provided by OSN was poor. Water scarcity during the summer, interruptions of water provision, low pressure, scarce quality of the water and flooding from the sewage system in case of heavy rainfall were wretched characteristics of the operation of OSN (Loftus and McDonald 2001-185; Alcázar et al. 2002: 3-4; Casarin et al. forthcoming 2007).

Two further features (interrelated to each other) of OSN are issues that traditionally constitute arguments for privatization. The fallacious management and very poor investment rate shown by the public company constituted two classical hooks for the supporters of an entry of the private sector.

First, according to Alcázar et al., OSN presented several deficiencies, which connoted it as a weak, inefficient and bulky piece of the State apparatus. To provide some examples, “top management was politically chosen and priorities were set according to non-commercial criteria ... Salaries were low, turnover of skilled personnel, high, and the entire workforce suffered from low productivity and lack of discipline” (Alcázar et al. 2002: 6).

In order to explain the poor service provided, the scarce quality of management – a “little autarky” according to Casarin et al. (forthcoming 2007: 3) – has to be seen in conjunction with the scarce resources

¹¹ The World Bank is cited here not only in reason of its role on the globally scale in the discussion about – and financing of – infrastructures (Finger and Allouche 2002), but also since it had an active role in the privatization both in the preparation phase (see Loftus :183), during the renegotiations and conflicts among the state and AASA (Azpiazu et al. 2005; interview with Seillant), and even by being a minor stockholder of AASA via the International Finance Corporation, a member of the WB Group (Loftus :185).

ended by the public utility. During the decade previous the privatization, OSN placed investments for about USD 25 million a year (Galiani et al. 2005: 108). This investment rate for sure did not allow any relevant expansion of the network (in pace with rapid urbanization in the outskirts), and was not even enough to compensate depreciation and to remedy the aging of the infrastructure, creating and worsening the factors behind the poor quality of service of which above (Alcázar et al. 2002: 4). On top of this, the shaky finances of OSN were not made more solid by the fact that the unaccounted for water reached 40-50 % (Loftus and McDonald 2001: 184), where the average for OECD countries lies between 10 and 20 % (Alcázar et al. 2002).

The combination of those factors led Buenos Aires – “at the beginning of the twentieth century, one of the world’s best equipped cities in water and sewage” (Schneier-Madanes 2001: 45)– to the critical situation of the beginning of the 90s, especially in the province. In spite of the abundance of water (see previous section), and of the very low potential marginal cost of water¹², at the time of the privatization in 1993 about 30% of the population was not served by the water network (Loftus and McDonald 2001: 186), moreover, about 40% of the population was not connected to the sewage system (ibid.). To note that sewage and water network covered almost completely the area of CF, and the deficiencies were concentrated in the suburbs - another dimension of the gap between the central area and the surrounding districts (see ch.3).

4.1.3 Political context and the Neo-Liberal reforms

Apart from the objective deficiencies that undermined the functioning (and reputation) of OSN, it is important to consider the political phase in which Argentina was in the early 90s. A starting point for some reflections on the topic is the fact that, as pointed out by Loftus and McDonald, any solution other than privatization was not really taken into account, even if actions to ‘rescue’ OSN were possible (2001: 185). Similar reflections were expressed by Horacio Seillant, who argued that OSN was not in ‘catastrophic’ conditions at the time of the privatization, and could have been ‘saved’ by a more serious effort by the State (interview). In fact, the choice for a withdrawal of the state from many economical areas was the result of an organic political line followed by the Menem’s government. Carlos Menem, elected in 1989, inherited from the previous governments a difficult situation: sky-high inflation, economic stagnation and the state finances in serious troubles (Azpiazu and Basualdo 2004). The chaotic situation (which lead some to fear a new intervention by the military) and the objective state of economic quasi-emergence were conditions for a ‘strong’ medicine. According to Azpiazu and Basualdo, a triple convergence of interests allowed Menem to ‘impose’ his radical reforms. The conjunction of interests of local economic groups and of foreign creditors, which saw possible benefits in the re-structuring proposed by the Menem’s recipe, and the resource redistribution – from State to private – that it would imply (ibid.), and the popular support Menem enjoyed, allowed him to quickly shift towards a neo-liberal political line. This represented a “Copernican revolution” (ibid: 56), an epochal change in the Argentinean context. Menem's political line introduced “a new relation among the state, the private corporations and the citizenship, ... and the retraction [of the state] implied a real twisting in the presence of the state in the national economy, ... [after] sixty years of predominantly redistributive and interventionist policies” (Azpiazu et al. 2005: 48, author's translation). This radical shift took the form of policies aimed to a reduction of the State debt and a radical cut of the State participation to economy through liberalizations and privatizations (also in order to generate some extra inflows for the State). The telecommunications, large parts of the energy sector, parts of the military defence, the post

¹² An estimation of 0.15 USD/m³ is given by Alcazár et al., and can be compared to the analogous figure for Lima (Peru), which is three times higher , 0.45 USD/m³ (2002: 3).

services were very rapidly and often by presidential decrees transferred to the private sector (Azpiazu et al. 2005: 46). These reflection are useful to better understand that the causes for the privatization of OSN were not only technical, but are to be found also in the general context and political climate of the 90s' Argentina'

4.2 The outcomes of the privatization

It is not the aim of the present work to elaborate a conclusive evaluation of the privatization of OSN. Nevertheless, this chapter gives a brief overview about the outcomes of the 13 years of private management of water and sanitation services in Buenos Aires. In order to introduce the evaluation of the outcomes of the Aguas Argentinas concession, it is useful to make a couple of reflections.

First, the debate about the success or failure of the privatization is not settled, and, while in the first years the privatization was presented almost unanimously as an example of a success of the '*menemismo*'¹³, of the 'new model' of the 90s, more and more negative evaluation of the privatization have been published¹⁴.

Second, and among the causes of what described above, a profound ideological charge can be noticed in many evaluations of the outcomes of the privatization and of the last turbulent 15 years. The judgement of the '*menemismo*', of the dismantling of a large part of the State, of the market oriented, neo-liberal policies, is – more often than in other cases – directly related to the political standpoints of the writer, both for the debate inside Argentina and internationally¹⁵.

Stated this, this chapter will give a brief summary of some of the outcomes with regard to the main targets and conditions provided for by the concessions.

4.2.1 Production and Quality of Service

The quality of the offered service has without doubts improved. The supply interruptions have been reduced, the water quality and pressure at tap has increased, the response to complains become much faster, and the water spills have been reduced (Alcázar et al. 2002: 47; Galiani et al. 2005: 109). Moreover, an increase in productivity has been achieved, mainly because of the severe reduction of the number of employees, more or less halved, from 7300 to 3770 unities (Casarin et al. forthcoming 2007: 11), as happened for privatizations in general (Geldstein 1997: 558; Azpiazu and Basualdo 2004: 96).

The amount of 'produced' water slightly increased, and, according to Galiani et al., 90% of the customers pay their bills, even if only 60% of them pay on time (2005: 108).

¹³ The deepness of the signs (positive or negative, depending on the observer) left by Menem's presidency is such that a substantive – *menemismo* – was coined to indicate the political movement and orientation behind Menem. The word is used even to indicate the historical period.

¹⁴ For some examples of positive views: Idelovitch and Ringskog (1995), Alcázar et al. (2002), Clarke et al. (2004), Galiani et al. (2005); for some negative views see e.g.: Loftus and McDonald (2001), Azpiazu et al. (2005) Casarin et al. (forthcoming 2007).

¹⁵ This politicization of the debate is surely due to the sharp tensions in the country and the graveness of the crisis of the beginning of this decade, which have sharpened the tones of the debate. However, it is surely due also to the fact that Argentina was erected by many as model of the neo-liberal, market oriented recipe of development.

4.2.2 Tariffs and Economic Access

The actual dynamics of the tariffs during the privatization are not easy to determine. This lack of clarity depends on the fact that the tariff for single users was calculated using a convoluted formula¹⁶, which takes into account the type of service (water or sewage), the customer category (residential or not), the location of the property and the dwelling area and size (ETOSS 2001). Alcazár et al. argue that the tariff regime was obscure, with too many parameters giving the company the chance to increase tariffs in several 'hidden' ways, not only by changing the adjustment coefficient K (see footnote 16), but also by manipulating the other factors (2002: 21). This situation created a critical situation, where the company had much deeper insight in the real tariff system than the regulator had access to (ibid).

Table 1 shows the evolution of the tariff for an average user as calculated by ETOSS. Interesting enough is that the government, when it already had informally taken the decision to privatize OSN, increased the tariff by 25%, officially in order to re-align the tariff to the real prices. Loftus and McDonald note that "the effect of these increases was to allow the company to offer what seemed to the public to be a 27 per cent decrease in costs, even though in reality it was a manufactured reduction" (2001: 190). They also argue that the same strategy has been applied in other cases of water privatization¹⁷ in order to milder the public reaction to privatization (ibid), and Azpiazu and Basualdo report of sharp price increases before privatization also in several cases of Argentinean privatization in other sectors than water (2004: 68-71).

When taking into account the increase before the privatization¹⁸, it is evident that a significant increase in the tariffs has taken place, an increase of about 88% between 1993 and 2004, to be compared to an increase in general prices of 7%, as estimated by Azpiazu et al. (2005: 58). The increment in the tariffs is a factor that might undermine the argument that the privatization increased the economic access to water for disadvantaged citizens. A hint in this direction is given by Casarin et al.'s calculation: according to their estimation while the tariff change represented only 0.35 % of the incomes for the richest sectors of the population, the increase eroded 2.47 % of the incomes of the poorest (forthcoming 2007: 9).

An element that nuances the discussion both on the physical access (and the network expansion) and the economic access (tariffs) is the fact that 95% of the people not connected to the water network in 1993 got water from private, individual wells (Loftus and McDonald 2001: 186). Moreover, the concession established that the connection to the network was compulsory for all, and prohibited the usage of any private well. This fact has two implications: one is that the figure about connections should not be considered as indications of access or not to water, but only to access to the water network. Secondly, the compulsory nature of the connection, the price increases and the high connection costs (until 1997 up to 700 USD, (Casarin et al. forthcoming 2007: 7)) implied the fact that water, for many people in the suburban areas, turned from a free resource to a rather expensive one they were forced to pay for¹⁹.

¹⁶ the formula is $BBT_{ij} = TG_{ij} \cdot K \cdot Z \cdot (SC \cdot E + 0.10 \cdot ST)$. BBT_{ij} is the tariff for the i -th type of service (water or sewerage) for the j -th customer type (residential, non-residential, and land lot), TG_{ij} is a general tariff, K is an adjustment coefficient, Z is a factor varying with the location, E is a coefficient varying with the age and type of the property, SC and ST the property's total built size and lot area (ETOSS 2001: 52).

¹⁷ Azpiazu and Basualdo report of sharp price increases before privatization also in several cases of Argentinean privatization in other sectors than water (2004: 68-71).

¹⁸ The tariff in table 1 at the voice OSN is the one after the increase.

¹⁹ This is not to deny that the connection to the network can lead to a better water quality and avoid possible problems of water contamination.

Table 1 : Evolution of the tariff for an average user

| Event | Date | Average Tariff (in Argentinan Pesos) | Average tariff (may 1993 index = 100) |
|---------------------------------|--------------|--|---|
| OSN | May 1993 | 19,40 | 133 |
| AASA's Offer | May 1993 | 14,56 | 100 |
| 1 st tariff revision | June 1994 | 16,53 | 114 |
| 2 nd tariff revision | May 1998 | 21,65 | 149 |
| Increase 2001 | January 2001 | 26,25 | 180 |
| Increase 2002 | January 2002 | 27,40 | 188 |

Source: ETOSS (nd)

4.2.3 Network Expansion, Physical Access and Investments

The network backwardness before the privatization, and the exclusion of a significant part of the population of GBA from the access to the water and sanitation systems, explain why a key element of the concession targets was the expansion of the network (Casarin et al. forthcoming 2007). The (economically sustainable) achievement of universal access to water and sewage services was the ultimate goal of the concession, and privatization was presented as a means to raise capitals (see ch. 4.1.2). Moreover, the targets were tuned in order to benefit “low-income sectors located in marginal areas” (ibid: 4), in order to reduce the sharp inequalities among different areas (Schneier-Madanes 2001: 49).

The investments by the AASA, compared with the decade before the privatization (when OSN did not invest more than about USD 25 million a year), increased dramatically: between 1993 and 2000, according to Galiani et al.'s estimate, Aguas Argentinas invested around USD 200 million a year (Galiani et al. 2005: 108). Azpiazu et al. note that AASA realized investments much larger than what done by OSN, but points out that AASA did not comply with the conditions established by the contract. According to Azpiazu et al., in the period 1993-1998 AASA invested only 58% of what was provided for in the concession contract, and only 37% of the investments due in the period 2001-2002 (2005: 54). In this context, two more facts should be noted. First, AASA quickly become a profitable company. In the period 1993-2001 AASA had a profit return of 13% on turnover, and a return on equity of 20%²⁰ (Alcázar et al. 2002; Azpiazu et al. 2005: 54-55). Second, as pointed out both by Alcázar et al. and Azpiazu et al., AASA presented a high debt exposition, higher than what ETOSS reputed to be financially sustainable and acceptable according to the concession clauses (ibid).

Concerning the expansion of the network (see table 2), there is no shared interpretation of the outcomes of the privatisation. Galiani et al. and Alcázar et al. highlight the increase in the number of the connections, with an increase of 4.2 % in the number of households connected to the water network (Alcázar et al. 2002; Galiani et al. 2005: 116). Others focus on the fact that the targets stipulated by the concession were not at all reached by AASA. According to Casarin et al., “[d]espite the increase of new users, by the end of 2003 coverage rates for water and sewerage were still behind the contract’s targets, implying failures to comply of about 46 and 70 percent, respectively”, (forthcoming 2007: 4).

There is no agreement on the extent to which the positive outcomes of the privatization have reached the poorest stratum of the population. According to Galiani et al., the increase in the network coverage was concentrated in low-incomes areas (2005: 113).

20 According to Azpiazu et al, these rates of return were much higher than what is considered to be “reasonable” in other countries, estimated by Aspiazu et al. to be between 6,5 and 12,5 % in USA, and between 6 and 7% in Great Britain (2005: 55).

Table 2: Network expansion in Capital Federal and Conurbano

| | Initial (1993) | Outcomes (2003) | Concession Targets vs Outcomes |
|---|--------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| <i>Population Served (in thousands)</i> | | | |
| <i>Potable Water</i> | | | |
| Capital Federal | 2931 | 2977 | - 23 % |
| Partidos | 3092 | 4301 | - 47 % |
| <i>Sanitation</i> | | | |
| Capital Federal | 2931 | 2981 | - 17 % |
| Partidos | 2024 | 2602 | - 70 % |

Source: adapted from Casarin et al. (forth. 2007)

At the same time, Alcázar et al. – in general positive towards the privatization – question the fact that poor households received significant benefits, and highlight the high cost of the connections as a factor of disadvantage for households that did not have any connection before the privatization, very often poor households. (2002: 51-55). This concern is not typical of the only Buenos Aires case. Mehrotra and Delamonica, in an article discussing service privatization globally, claim that private operators “can be good at improving services for those who already have water connections, but typically do not help those without connections, who are also less politically influential”(Mehrotra and Delamonica 2005: 160).

Casarin et al. analyse data disaggregated for different districts, and highlights the fact that the poorer areas were the ones less benefited by network expansion. According to Casarin et al., “it could be speculated that the likelihood for the firm of failing to comply with expansion targets in a specific district be positively related to the magnitude of investments required for system expansion but negatively related to the potential revenue to be earned from households residing in such an area.”(forthcoming 2007: 4). Casarin et al. performed an analysis of the data, and claim that “the districts with high population, low density and high levels of poverty are more likely to be in the group of districts for which ... the contract’s targets had not been fulfilled”(ibid: 5). This, according to Casarin et al., “seem[s] to suggest that the licensee did comply with the targets in those districts for which the costs of service expansion seemed to be low and the economic well being of users offered the most attractive income stream”(ibid: 5). If considering AASA’s high profitability, the high recourse to debt capitals, the deficiencies in the network expansion, and the price increases, it is licit to suspect that AASA chose to keep investments as low as possible and to finance them with external funds. In few words, Aguas Argentina seem to have kept the kind of “opportunistic behaviour” Alcazar et al. indicated as a possibility in case the control process would not work correctly (2002: 22).

Moreover, according to an estimation by Loftus and McDonald, if the actual investment rate is considered in conjunction with the high revenues, the tariffs increases, the debt contracted, then the own resources invested by AASA are in an order of magnitude “that could have been equally accessible to a publicly owned water entity” (Loftus and McDonald 2001: 189), as the OSN.

5. Argentina: an overview of women’s situation

An interesting starting point for giving a brief overview of women’s situation in Argentina can be found in an essay by Dora Barrancos, who claims that the changes Argentina has undergone in the last century can be defined as “modernization rather than modernity” (2006: 124). Barrancos argues that the structural, technological and organizational innovations that have so profoundly modified the country in the last century have not been sided by equally deep changes in social “subjectivities“, for example with regards to sexual

liberties and familiar structures. In other words, the modernization of certain ‘material’ aspects of the land has not carried along modernity, if by it one means “changes in subjectivity, attitudes, and behaviours”, and Argentina witnesses the “persistence of material and symbolic traditional icons” (ibid: 126). In this way, many material indicators of modernity, e.g. infrastructures, production systems and technology, coexist with clearly traditionally patriarchal moral frameworks and social structures and subjectivities, as reflected as well in politics and economy.

Others show a more optimistic view, at least of recent past. For instance, Bonder and Rosenfeld argue that the decade of the 90s has been characterized by the “deepening and broadening of the process of “emancipatory modernization” (2004: 6, author's translation), which has led to conquests in the legal field and in the private liberties, as well as in women’s participation to the political and economical life.

5.1 Rights and legislation

As a first step, it is possible to give a look at the situation concerning women’s rights. The Argentinean legislation is not among the most advanced in the world, and presents features of conservativeness common to many Latin and catholic countries. As a symptomatic example, abortion is totally forbidden and in general not accepted by conservative streams that still have a relevant influence in the public debate (Barrancos 2006: 135ff). The right to divorce, on the contrary, has been sanctioned in relatively recent times (1987), after a long struggle – what Barrancos depicts as “the saga of a century” (ibid: 135) – which has met tough opposition. The passage of the divorce law was surrounded by loud critiques in the public debate in the sign of the defence of the traditional (patriarchal) family, critiques very loud especially from the sectors and parties closer to the influence of the catholic church (Barrancos 2006: 127; interview with Marisú Devoto).

Domestic and sexual violence are still a serious plague in the Argentinean society²¹, the legislation presents flaws, and sexual violence was introduced as an offence against the integrity of the victim (before it was sanctioned as an offence to the *honour of the husband*) with the reform of the penal code in 1999 (Bonder and Rosenfeld 2004: 15). Even this advancement was surrounded by sharp critiques and opposition because of the ‘progressive’ implication of the changes introduced (interview with Marisú Devoto).

Another usual indicator is the degree of women participation to the legislative, executive and judiciary powers. To begin with a positive remark, Argentina presents a high rate of female representatives in the Congress. The percentage of parliamentary seats occupied by women in Argentina was 28% in year 1999 (UNSD 2007), mainly as a result of the Law of Female Quotes (*Ley de Cupo Feminino*) promulgated in 1993, which established female quotes for the elections lists of candidates (Bonder and Rosenfeld 2004: 12). Nevertheless, much more is to be done: similarly to many other catholic and Latin countries, the picture is quite discomfoting, with few women in the judiciary system and very scarce female presence in the government and in the higher levels of the governmental apparatus (ibid: 71-73).

5.2 The economic sphere and the labour market

Even of the economic sphere manifests gender-based forms of inequality. It is revealing to look at the labour market. There is a clear gap between average wages for women and men: at the end of the 90s the average women’s salary was about 70 % of men’s, and the gap in hour salary was of about 10% (Subsecretaría de la Mujer 1999: 36; García 2003: 23-24). Moreover, the Argentinean work market

²¹ Bonder and Rosenfeld estimate that in every fifth couple there are forms of violence, and that the cases of sexual offences amount to 600 thousands a year in the only Buenos Aires province (2004: 13-14)

maintains both *horizontal* and *vertical* occupational segregation²². Horizontal segregation is shown by the concentration of female workforce in few – typically/traditionally ‘female’ not only in Argentina – sectors, as education, services, and health care (Subsecretaría de la Mujer 1999: 33). Moreover, the low participation of women to executive and managerial positions in the economic organizations witnesses the persistence of vertical segregation (Bonder and Rosenfeld 2004: 76).

The unpaid labour domestic work is another indicator of the unequal situation in which women are constrained. The gender and the class dimension interact – not at all surprisingly – creating a situation where women carry a disproportionately (in comparison to men) large burden for the housework, children and elderly care, difference that is inversely proportional to incomes. An extensive research published by the Consejo Nacional de la Mujer²³ reveals that 90% of women in Buenos Aires is in charge of the housework and related tasks, and that this non-paid work on an average occupies 7 hours a day (Rupnik and Colombo 2006: 110). To note that the burden (in terms of spent time) of non-paid becomes lighter ascending the income level (ibid. 118).

It is central to have also a look at the changes in the labour market during the 90s, a decade that has witnessed deep changes in the Argentinean economic structure and in the configuration of labour, mainly as a result of the neo-liberal policies of the government (of which privatization was a part, as mentioned in the previous sections). These profound changes have influenced and modified even women’s participation to the economy and to the labour market. A palpable and clear tendency of the whole decade was the insertion of females into the work force. The female active population has increased sensibly, reaching 43,2 % in 1999 in comparison to 35,3 % in year 1990, and with a reduction of the gap to the gap to correspondent male rates from about 40 to 30% (Dirección General de la Mujer 2001: 157).

Several reasons can lie behind such a change. As suggested by García, three are the factors that can lie behind such an increase of active female population (2003: 13):

1. Incentive factors: a positive economic conjuncture causes an increase of the available jobs and of the wages, and this ‘attracts’ more women to paid work.
2. Additional income factor: in case of a contraction of the wages and of the number of jobs, in order to x the loss of incomes in their households, more people enters the work market
3. Cultural factors: cultural changes in the society not directly dependent on economy take place and affect behaviour and customs.

According to García, all of the three played a role, even if in different times, and to different extents. The economic progression of the early 90s may point to the first factor above, while the general detriment of the conditions of the working class in the second half of the decade seem to indicate the second factor, not to forget that changes in the gender related customs have taken place as a long-term phenomenon (2003: 13). Lo Vuolo and Pautassi tend to put more emphasis on the second factor. They argue that the “feminization” of the labour force was principally caused by the need additional incomes due to the worsening of general condition of workers. Some facts tend to support this view. It is worth noting that in the same period the rate of unemployment drastically increased among women, from 4,5 to 11,3% (Dirección General de la Mujer 2001: 158), suggesting that the entry into the work force has found only a partial response in the labour

²² According to the ILO, occupational segregation “concerns both the tendency for men and women to be employed in different occupations (horizontal segregation) and the tendency for women and men to be employed in different positions within the same occupation or occupational group (vertical segregation)” (Loutfi 2001: 191).

²³ National Woman’s Council, a department formally under the of the Presidency of the Republic.

market. Moreover, even the rate of sub-employment²⁴ has increased for the female workforce, more than for the male (ibid: 159). Sub- and unemployment among males, also increased sharply (ibid), constituting what Lo Vuolo and Pautassi label as “masculinization of unemployment and sub-employment” (1998: 147, quote translated by the author). Real incomes generally decreased in the 90s, and the work conditions became generally less secure, causing – with the facts exposed above – the appearance of generalized forms of “social vulnerability” (ibid: 146, author's translation) and the emergence of “previously unknown feelings of anguish and fear for the average working person” (Geldstein 1997: 570).

These factors seem to indicate that the insertion into the work market was caused more by necessity than by positive conjunctures or cultural emancipation, and can hardly be depicted as ‘emancipatory’ or as a healthy mobilization of the female working force²⁵. The often disadvantageous condition of insertion of women were also confirmed in an interview with Devoto, who argued that in order to front the economic difficulties “women are prepared to accept almost everything”(Marisú Devoto 2007). Women were often more or less forced to enter the market and did it from a weak ‘bargaining position’, and entered very often in disadvantaged conditions, with precarious jobs, low salaries and ‘female’ occupations (Lo Vuolo and Pautassi 1998; García 2003).

5.3 A patriarchal society: women as a weak group

This brief overview shows the persistence of gendered discrimination in a substantially patriarchal society. Especially the differential role in economic tasks and the segregation in the labour market seem to indicate a major fragility/exposition of women in case of economic stress for the household, where women had to ‘go out’ and work to front the monetary problems, and still provide for housework, often carrying a double weight (Geldstein 1997: 8). Even the diminution of the services provided by the State (the shrinking of the welfare state actuated in the 90s) has seen in women of lower classes a group much more exposed to worsening in the economic situation, and which tends to pay a higher price for the fluctuations of economic circles and periods (Geldstein 1997). More exposed since positioned in a disadvantaged location both in terms of rights (which trend to mirror power relations in families, households and in society in great), of economic conditions (working double more and more often in disadvantaged positions) and ‘left alone’ by the drawback of the support from the State.

What so far exposed highlights the coexistence of contrasting and interplaying dynamics. The ongoing process of “emancipatory modernization” and the important conquest of the last decades cohabited with the persistence of radically conservative tendencies in the society, and with phenomena and tendencies capable to cause serious and structural worsening of women’s conditions. The precarious economic conditions and factors as the disadvantaged insertion in the labour force, and the gender differential effects of pauperization, lead to a detriment of the women’s condition, still subjected to the conditions of a patriarchal and discriminatory society which exposes women to sharper consequences if something goes wrong (concern raised e.g. in Bonder and Rosenfeld 2004: 7).

²⁴ Sub-employment refers to workers who unwillingly work less than full time (García 2003).

²⁵ for a concise exposition of the virtuous circle of mobilization of female labour force, beneficial both for the emancipation of women and for economic development, see e.g. World Bank 2006.

6. The Empirical Research

6.1 Methodological aspects

As explained in chapter 2.2, the research is designed as qualitative, coherently to its aims. Therefore the interviews were configured as qualitative and “open-ended”, in order to get deeper insight by creating a more relaxed interaction with the interviewees and by allowing them to expose more freely their points of view (Yin 2003: 90). As recommended by Bryman in case of semi-structured interviews, an interview ‘guide’²⁶ was prepared, to clearly define the information that was meant to be obtained from the interviews, and to plan a convenient sets of topics to touch (2004: 321).

The relatively loose structure of the interviews was chosen also in order to avoid the ethical and practical issues raised in chapter 2.4, and as an attempt to give the interviewees room to express themselves more freely, and according to their perspectives. Because of this strategy, the interviews resulted in interesting and relatively relaxed conversations. Even if sometimes leading to diversions about unrelated topics, this gave the chance to understand the point of view of the interviewee, and to obtain precious hints about priorities, issues and themes felt as most relevant by the interviewees.

The ethical problem of the possible consequences for the informants, highlighted by Kvale (1997: 104ff) was taken into consideration. The Argentinean society – and especially in its modest sectors – presents a certain distrust when in the situation to give their opinion about political power or authorities, probably also as a legacy of the dark period of the dictatorship (1976-1983) that has left its traces in the attitude towards authority. Moreover, most of the interviewees live in quite precarious conditions, situation that exposes them to possible problems with authorities. As an example, some of the interviewees preferred not to be recorded on tape during the interview. In order to avoid this complication, it was clearly explained to the interviewees that an ‘independent’ student was doing the work, which was not commissioned by the municipality, the water utility or any other authority, and that these authorities would not have access to texts of the interviews.

6.2 The interviews

The interviews were performed with women living in different parts of GBA, both in the CF and in the *conurbano*. The targets of the interviews were ‘normal’ women, chosen among people not militant in any NGO active in the water field, neither employed by AASA or by the government. The respondents, unlike the informants, were chosen according to this criterion in the attempt to collect a view from ‘below’, as real as possible, which could mirror the situation and its perception among common persons. The choice not to interview, as respondents, militants was taken not only in order to bypass the bias that people active in NGOs or other organizations might have, but targeting a group of people not doted of the information fund politically active people often have.

The areas in which the interviewees live represent some spots in the myriads of micro-cosmos that the heterogeneous GBA universe presents. Two of the series (Santa Catalina and Villa 15, see below) were collected in disadvantaged areas of the metropolis, one in the CF and one in the *conurbano*, presenting serious socio-economical problems and giving a touch on the reality of some of the marginalized population of GBA. The areas of precarious dwellings in GBA are not an insignificant issue, as a considerable number of people live in such conditions (see ch. 3). The two other series were to a certain extent the control sample,

²⁶ The guideline can be consulted in the Appendix 1.



Figure 2: A house in Barrio Obrero (picture: Anahí Merino)

with interviewees belonging to (at least relatively) well-off strata of the population. The area of San José (see below), during the exercise of the privatized company, was connected to the water network at a low cost for the inhabitants, reason for which the specific area was chosen.

6.2.1 Santa Catalina – Barrio Obrero

One series (6 interviews, female interviewees) was done in **Santa Catalina/Barrio Obrero**, an area in the *partido* (municipality/ district) of Lomas de Zamora, in the southern part of the Buenos Aires province. The specific area of Santa Catalina is located in a district famous for unfortunate reasons. The municipality of Lomas de Zamora presents a high rate of poverty and social exclusion, and contains some of the many nuclei of degradation in the area of BA. The interviews were done in an ensemble of informal settlements (*asentamiento*) where the inhabitants generally have occupied a piece of land and built their often temporary dwellings. The fact that the inhabitants do not have any formal rights on the land they dwell are the main causes for the almost complete exclusion of the area from the provision of public services (among them water and sewage).

All the interviewees were female (ages between 29 and 44) not living alone (one with two daughters, the others with husbands and children) and the monthly incomes of their households were between 150 and 300 USD, an income which situates them in the 4 lowest deciles of incomes (per household) in Argentina. Some of the interviewees are going to join a governmental housing plan and are going to receive a legally owned house in the same area. None of the interviewed in Barrio Obrero had a regular connection to the water and sewage network. Some of the people, in cooperation with their neighbours, realized illegal connections to the network, some from the neighbours (also illegally connected), and others used wells. This represents a dangerous solution, since the groundwater in the area is heavily polluted. Moreover, since the area is located about 2 meters below the flooding table, it is quite often – in case of heavy rains – hit by floods, occasions on which wells are filled with dirty water (but still used thereafter without any special cleaning). An additional

problem is represented by the high levels of the watertable (see ch.4.1.1), that has reached such a high level in the last decade that the surface pollutants and the material from the cesspools contaminate the surrounding ground and water, polluting also the wells and often – together with the floods – causing the cesspools to overflow. As an aggravating circumstance, most of the interviewees did not show to be aware of the risks that the situation implies.

6.2.2 San José

Another series of interviews (two interviews) was done in San José, a neighbourhood in the *partido* of Almirante Brown, located in the southern part of GBA. The *partido* presents serious problems of social and economic nature, but the locality where the interviews were done is above the average (mirrored by the incomes of the respondents, above 600 USD per month): the life conditions are in general better than in other areas, and the population in general does not live in problematic situations. This characteristic was evident even only when walking around in the area, which had a more ‘pleasant’ appearance, especially if considered in the context of BA’s southern suburbs. The area is not served by sewage system, but was connected to the water network about 10 years ago, during the period in which Aguas Argentina was the concessionaire in GBA.

6.2.3 Villa 15 – La Ciudad Oculta

Villa 15 is a shantytown in the southern part of the town (of Capital Federal), though inside the city. The area is known in Buenos Aires also with the not pleasant nickname of *Ciudad Oculta* (the hidden city). The ‘obscure’ epithet derives from the fact that during the 1978 World Soccer Championships hosted by Buenos Aires, the dictatorship in power at that time decided to fence the area with a wall, to ‘protect’ Villa 15 from the attention of foreign tourists flocked for the sport event. Villa 15 was the setting for three interviews. All the interviewees were female (aged between 28 and 34) not living alone (all living with husbands and 3-4 children) and the monthly incomes of their households were all around 400 USD respectively.

The area presents some features in common with Barrio Obrero. The inhabitants of Ciudad Oculta do not have formal rights for the land they dwell, and the area it is excluded from the provision of public services. This ‘exclusion’ or segregation is strongly felt by the inhabitants: one interview for instance remarked the issue by complaining that the police never enters the area, as an example of the fact that the municipality in general does not extend its ‘operations’ to the area. Another feature in common with Barrio Obrero is the fact that the area presents higher social problems than an average neighbourhood in BA.

A difference, if compared to Barrio Obrero, is that the inhabitants of Villa 15 generally dwell the area on more stable basis, so that the area is less ‘precarious’ than Barrio Obrero, and has more the characteristic of a permanent settlement (one of the interviewees has lived there 5 years, the others 13 and 18 years). Moreover, Ciudad Oculta lies inside the city of Buenos Aires and not in the suburbs, it is inserted in the urban fabric (even if it represents a *discontinuum* with the surroundings), and the buildings are disposed with a higher density.

The inhabitants of the area do not have access to water, sewage and electricity services. The inhabitants have nevertheless built a clandestine water network (by ‘hang-ups’) and organized a system of collection of the sewage water. The illegal water connection poses problems, since there is clearly no guarantee of the quality of the water, and the water pressure in many occasions is too low to lead water to the internal parts of Ciudad Oculta.

6.2.4 San Telmo and Montserrat

Another series of interviews (4 female interviewees) was done in the **central area** of Buenos Aires (Capital Federal). The interviewees (aged between 30 and 68) live in a 'normal' area of Buenos Aires, in the neighbourhoods of San Telmo and Montserrat. Those areas, even if presenting a population of quite a mixed social background, are not characterized by a high degree of social and economic degradation, and inhabitants with some economic difficulties are mixed with the middle class.

One of the interviewees lived alone, one with her mother and the others with children and husband. The monthly incomes of their households were 300 USD for the one alone, 500, 650 and 1660 USD for the others.

7. Evidence from the interviews

The following sections analyze and attempt to interpret the content of the interviews. The analysis addressed some topics of interest that – for sake of brevity and in order to give a clear comparative view – are discussed jointly for the four different areas.

7.1 Consumption and awareness

In general, the interviewees with lower incomes and in more disadvantaged conditions showed more awareness of the amount of water they consume. Both in Barrio Obrero and in Villa 15 the most of the respondents showed to know how much water they consume, even if the units of measure they use are buckets or tanks, rather than litres. This discrepancy seems to be a reflection of the fact that, being their access to water less secure and comfortable, and in certain cases being they forced to collect water with tanks or buckets, they 'see' the water they use.

The 'middle-class' women showed that they do not to have an accurate knowledge of the water they consume – not so unusual among 'normal people': one interviewee estimated her daily consumption in 5-6 litres of water, a value at least 50 times smaller than the average for a water user in Buenos Aires – 365 litres water per day per capita (Alcázar et al. 2002: 5).

7.2 Perception of the privatization

The "middle class" interviewees did not really perceive any effect of the privatization. They could only report of having heard of it and of having heard of the installation of meters in very few areas. The discussion about the privatization is kept at an ideological or abstract level, meaning that the facts that enter in the evaluation, regardless of the sign of the judgment, are neither really related to direct, personal experience nor to practical aspects of the issue. Even if not representative of any general trend, the sentence pronounced by one of the interviewees is quite explanatory of this approach: "the one who is really Argentinean and loves her country is not interested in privatization since they took away a lot of money and they did not make things better than before"

The people in Barrio Obrero could not report any 'direct' effect of the privatization, which is quite clear since they did not have a water connection before, and they still do not still have it. Their attitude towards the privatization showed a sort of "ideological indifference" (compared to what said above). They showed to see the problem more from a practical point of view, and in general manifested scepticism towards authorities and the company in general. They showed they did not make a big difference among AASA, AYSA and the former OSN. The impression from the interviews is that they were not really interested to the 'story', surely also because of the general scepticism that they expressed towards institutions. Not all of them knew even

the names of the concerned companies and authorities, and the ones who did recognize the name of AASA did it mainly because they had seen the logo on trucks or they had heard something in conversations. However, the disinterest in the issue of privatization (at least in political terms) did not mean a lack of attention for the issue of water. All the interviewees pointed out the centrality of water for their life, and manifested the problems connected to their situation. The interviewees reported that the precarious access to water represented a serious problem, and that the insecure conditions represented not only a burden in terms of work, but also as a further factor of insecurity in their lives.

One interviewee in Villa 15 (where there are only illegal connections, see ch.6.2.3), reported the serious problems caused by the precarious access to water. Moreover, she reported of the 'incident' that had happened after the starting of the private concession. Aguas Argentinas, which was attempting to reduce illegal connections and the unreturned for water, cut the 'hang-up' connections that provided water for the inhabitants of Villa 15, without offering any alternative besides remaining without water. About 8300 people lived in the area in year 2000 (Gobierno de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires nd). According to the interviewee, after a struggle from the dwellers, AASA accepted that the inhabitants re-established the illegal connection. Besides this episode (reported by one interviewee), the general attitude was similar to the one shown by people in Barrio Obrero: substantial indifference or lack of clear information.

The interviewees in San José did not show a special involvement in the issue of water privatization, and focused many of their comments on the problems caused by the lack of sewage system. Nevertheless, they clearly said to have benefited from the connection to the water network built by AASA built. One of the respondents, before the connection, had access to a neighbourhood net, connected to a pump managed by the local dwellers, a solution that did not assure a continuous provision of water. The system was not a clandestine connection, but a kind of cooperative organized by a group of neighbours who collected money to cover the expenses and maintained the pump and the small network. The second interviewee had a private water pump. The connection to the 'official' network represented an improvement of their condition, since the water outflow become more continuous and reliable, and since the pressure at the tap become higher. Moreover, they reported to pay less money for water, since the costs of managing the pumps were higher than the water bill. It is to note that the connection was established in San José after the renegotiation of the tariff system in 1997 so that the connection fees they had to pay were much lower than in the first years of the concession (see ch. 4).

7.3 Illegality and 'willingness to pay'

A common feature among the different groups is that all the people, at least according to what they expressed in the interviews, stated that they thought that paying - a reasonable price - for water is acceptable and even right.

The people paying a water bill unanimously affirmed that the price they paid was not too high, and some of them even argued that it was too low. Some of the respondents also argued that they reputed as appropriate to extend the diffusion of water meters, in order to allow people to pay for their actual consumption²⁷.

The ones not paying any fees and having 'clandestine connections' claimed to do that because of the lack of alternatives. This is not too hard to believe when you see the conditions of the areas and the almost total absence of services from the municipalities both in Barrio Obrero and in Villa 15, and when

²⁷ it is to note that the overwhelming number of users in Buenos Aires do not have a meter (see the description of the tariff system in ch. 4.2.2).

remembering the attitude AASA showed towards the population of Villa 15. Nevertheless, all the respondents claimed that they would be ready to pay for a regular service of water provision, and that they would do it in case they had the chance to. When asked about what they reputed to be a reasonable fee for water, they proposed sums in the same range of the actual fees, and the interviewees said not to be against having to pay even a connection fee. A sentence pronounced by one of the interviewees puts this aspiration into the broader frame of their life conditions. When talking about the lack of services and of the precarious situation and explaining her willingness to pay for receiving those services, one interviewee in Barrio Obrero said: “I’m aware of the fact that there are people living much worse than us, but the desire is to try to live as normal people ... no more no less than normal people, being people”.

7.4 Gender differential aspects, dynamics and effects

It is worth highlighting some aspects of the privatization concerning gender differential issues:

- among all the interviewees, the housework (i.e. cleaning, washing, cooking and other activities implying the use of water) resulted to be almost entirely a women’s task, as the care of the children. According to most of the interviewees, the management of the household incomes was done by the two partners together, even if the husbands in general earned much more and in some others the wives did not have a job.
- Different levels of collaboration from the husband were reported by the interviewees, even if in all but two of the cases the female had the main responsibility. According to what stated by some of the respondents, the ‘traditional’ division of roles and tasks is changing with the younger generations, towards a greater equality of responsibilities and functions among the family members.
- To the explicit question about who in the family would largely be benefited / suffer for improvements/ worsening of the access to water, all the interviewees affirmed that it would be an improvement/problem for the whole family.
- According to the answers in Barrio Obrero, the collection of water (in the cases people did not have a well or a tap) was a task managed by the women in collaboration with the husbands, who sometimes helped in reason of their capacity to carry heavier loads (according to the answers). Even in Ciudad Oculta the interviewees declared to be the ones who had to front higher workloads in case of lack of water, as in the period were the connection was cut or when the pressure decreases so that the water does not reach their houses. Approximately half the interviewees in Villa 15 and Barrio Obrero expressed the fact that they, as women/mother/wives, were more susceptible to changes, problems and improvements in their access to water. One interviewee in Villa 15 had a colourful and direct way to explain this: “Who do you think goes around looking for water, when nothing comes out of the tap? It’s us [indicating some women around here]”.
- One interviewee in San José, talking about the improvement brought about by the connection to the network, said that it was very good for the whole family, which got a cheaper and more comfortable access to water. Anyway, she explicitly stated that she had been benefited to a higher degree, since it had made easier several of her housework tasks.

8. Reflections on the case

One point that deserves to be raised regards the ‘common’ and rooted conception of the State as essentially less efficient than the private sector. The case of Buenos Aires seems to be an example of the non-universal validity of this belief. When asked about a general and ‘conclusive’ comment about the

experience of water privatization in BA, Horacio Seillant claimed that “some things were done, some investments were done, and improvements were achieved, but at a financial cost much larger than what the State would have paid in order to do the same” (interview, author’s translation). This statement refers to the fact that AASA, in order to guarantee the stockholders a high profitability, financed the investments mostly with debt (as discussed above), debt that could have been contracted by the State with much lower financial costs, according to Seillant (ibid). Moreover, the efficiency improvement of the company seems to have been achieved mostly with cuts in the number of the employees, already initiated by the State before the privatization, and that the AASA’s employees (the ones that did not lose their jobs) were almost all former OSN’s employees (Casarin et al. forthcoming 2007). These two elements inspire a more nuanced view about the superiority of the private sector in terms of efficiency, at least if efficiency is measured on the quality and extension of the service provided and not on profitability and ROE. Even if the State apparatus in many case is not an example of ‘agility’ and efficiency, the priorities of a private company – generally and ‘rightly’ profit – not necessarily (and it was not the case in Buenos Aires) favour the achievement of efficiency (from the citizen’s point of view).

Even if accepting the alleged inferiority of the State in terms of efficiency – the discussion above seriously questions this assumption at least in the studied case – the issue of the compatibility of private and public interest re-emerges as one of the hot themes of the discussion about privatization. A fragment by Galiani et al. is very clear about that:

the weak efficiency incentives in public firms might be tolerable when cost reductions by private suppliers come at the expense of undesirable quality deterioration or reductions in access by the poor. In particular, unregulated private providers may undersupply the socially optimal quality of water ... because they fail to take into account the marginal social benefits in their decisions. Similarly, private owners may exclude low-income households from the network by raising prices, strictly enforcing payment, and concentrating their investments in high-income areas (Galiani et al. 2005: 88).

Even if, for a moment, accepting the assumption of the ‘essential’ state inefficiency, the achievement of the goals of social sustainability that the provision of public services as water and sanitation (should) have (thus avoiding to discriminate low-income strata of the population) may be not be guaranteed by private providers. The conclusions of Galiani et al.’s study is that this and similar concerns, in the case of Buenos Aires, showed not to be grounded; on the contrary, according to Galiani et al. the privatization of OSN resulted in a positive change and in an improvement for the disadvantaged stratum of the population, measured through the decrease in child death rate (2005: 110).

This is not the only possible conclusion. The analysis done here seems to indicate that the citizens’ interest did not win, at least not the interest of all of them. The improvements and investment were concentrated more in areas that ‘could pay’, where the networks were extended and the service in general was enhanced (see ch. 4.2.3). However, not so much was done for the areas where the extension would have been costly or problematic (as Barrio Obrero and Ciudad Oculta). This selectivity on the investments and efforts seem to indicate that the privatisation – in a context where the State did not show the force or political will to have a strong position in front of AASA and require the fulfilment of the contract clauses (interview with Seillant) – ignited dynamics that often did not benefit the disadvantaged. The invisible hand did not benefit the weak. The decision to cut the illegal connection that fed the pipes in Villa 15 can be framed in this context. From an economic point of view, it represented a more than legitimate manoeuvre. When considering the social effects of it, and the importance of water for a decent life, the decision becomes less clearly positive. Also in reason of the fact that, due to the cost of installing the infrastructures for a regular

connection, AASA was not intentioned to give the inhabitants any other alternative than going out and buying water somewhere else.

In this context, women of lower economical status showed to be an overexposed group, for which the lack of secure access to water implied particularly weighty consequences, more accentuated than for men. In situations of social and economical marginalization as Barrio Obrero and Ciudad Oculta, women tended to be more exposed to material problems, as the unreliable access to water (ch.9.2 deepens this issue). The different susceptibility to problems of water access can be seen in parallel with the consequences of the changes that took place in Argentina in the 90s (see chapters 4.1.3 and 5.2). Situation of (increased) stress for the household – as the lack of water in Ciudad Oculta or a worsening of real incomes – tended to fall mainly on women. This in reason of the specific role (weak) they covered (and still cover) in the Argentinean society, at least in lower classes, which are also the ones hit by the sharpest consequences in case of crises or deterioration of life conditions.

As a concluding remark, the situation of Buenos Aires can be somehow concentrated in the amazing paradox: an area with too much water where many people do not have access to it. The paradox, which sounds like the final notation of the humanly impressed researcher, touches a serious issue, again linked to priorities. Lyla Mehta discusses the conceptualization of water scarcity in an essay called “Water for the twenty-first century: challenges and Misconceptions” (2000). In her essay, the researcher deconstructs the explanation given to the appearance of the problem of water scarcity, and contests the view that those are mainly ‘physical’, dealing with “biophysical” shortage of water. Mehta emphasizes the social and ideological roots of the conceptualization of water scarcity, which often tend to propose “Malthusian” views of the issue. The case of Buenos Aires in a way seems to point to the same direction. Many are the geographical location where water is biophysically scarce, but the Buenos Aires experience represents an exhortation not to create or accept ‘socially selective’ scarcity by applying policies and measures that do not prioritize universal access.

Part II - Feminist theories and the explanation of the case

9. Feminist Theories, Gender and Water Privatization

The debate about development, gender and sustainability is very rich, and the literature offers a broad spectrum of conceptualizations, analysis and standpoints. Among the elements that differentiate the competing ideas and paradigms, two are especially relevant for this work: the conceptualizations of the interconnection between gender and economical structures (read privatization), as well as the different analysis of the ‘special connection’ between women and nature (see conceptualization of women and water). Those two dividers have also constituted two different angles of view, almost two disciplines, or at least two approaches²⁸.

The issue of water privatization does not represent an exception, and different positions and arguments (and the respective proposal of strategies to solve the problem) diverge on the analysis of economic

²⁸ A quick glance at the literature shows that the issues of gender and economics or development and gender and environment (and the linkage women-nature) are often treated by different groupings/traditions of scholars (see e.g. Visvanathan et al. 1997).

dynamics and of the linkage between water and women (as a particular case of the connection women-nature), and often focus only on one of the two dimensions.

The previous section, the study about a case of water privatization, besides raising question about privatization in general, offers several hints for reflections about the theoretical analysis and conceptualizations that are given of gender and water, and of gender and economical policies. There are two relatively simple aspects emerged from the fieldwork that deserve to be inspected in this section:

- the consequences of water privatization can be different for women and men
- the differentiation does not appear in the same way in different social strata/classes/settings

The results of the field study suggest therefore the existence of differential effects that function both at the macro-level (among social groups) and at the micro-level (inside the household), even if the patterns shown in the two dimensions are not exactly the same.

The reason for the differences, both at the micro-level (between men and women) and at the macro-level (among social groups/classes), is apparently quite straightforward. As agreed by in principle all the recent literature about gender and development/economics/sustainability, very few policies are neutral, and in general strategies, changes and policies (as privatization) have a differential impact on different social groups, e.g. on men and women (Lastarria-Cornhiel 1997; World Bank 2001; GWA 2006). And one could say that this is the *raison d'être* of gender mainstreaming (UNECOSOC 1997; UN 2002). Since they are applied to a non-neutral reality and they are 'mediated' by existing social norms, structures and organizations, political measures hardly affect social groups and actors in an equal fashion, both referring to society as a whole and to the household. Therefore, it should not be surprising that, when applied to a patriarchal society, water privatization presents differential effects among women and men, as among social groups.

9.1 The Link women- nature

The division of tasks inside the household implies that in many of the traditional 'feminine' activities women use water and very often are responsible for the provision of water. So to say, women in certain settings – e.g. in certain sectors of the Argentinean society – are closer to water than men. At this point of the discussion, it becomes useful to assess the interpretation of this closeness, of this difference to males. One of the two ways proposed in the present work is to address the question of the relationship between women and nature, the 'connection' or relationship alleged, argued and stated by many²⁹, that is echoed in many discussion about water and access to it. This theme, to which the feminist literature has reserved large room, emerges in the discussion here when one more deeply assess the reason for the fact that women get closer to water. In fact if the more spontaneous answer indicates the differentiation of tasks, a deeper analysis leads to questioning the reason for the division of tasks with regards to water, and in general with regards to nature.

This linkage between women and nature is one of the central themes for Eco-feminism and in a way the starting point for the whole eco-feminist discourse (see e.g. Mellor 1996, 2000; Warren 2000; Buckingham 2004). Because of its centrality, the explanation of the nature of the linkage represents one of the main elements of division among the different scholars identifiable as eco-feminist, and in general among feminist scholars. The answers to the question have been of different types in the last decades. Warren gives an overview of the different factors that have been proposed as origins of the 'special' linkage women-nature. She categorizes them into 10 types of interconnections: historical, conceptual, empirical, socioeconomic, linguistic, symbolic, spiritual and religious, epistemological, political, ethical (Warren 2000: ff). For

²⁹ See e.g. the texts by Shiva (1989), Merchant (1989), Agarwal (1992), Mellor (1997), Warren (2000).

brevity's sake, I divide here the different interpretations into three rough macro-groups. Those who can be labelled as essentialists (that see the root in a universal immanent factors, as biology, see e.g. Collard (1988), those who individuate the origin of the link mainly in cultural or ideological factors (among those post-modern influenced, and then symbolic and conceptual, as Carolyn Merchant (1989), or to a certain extent Vandana Shiva (1989)), and those who see it as a material/materialistic relation (Agarwal 1992; Mellor 2000).

The essentialist position has lost most of the support it used to enjoy in the past. The nowadays broadly accepted notion³⁰ of gender as socially constructed puts in serious troubles this type of explanation (which in general sees the presence of an essential difference between men and women). In a phase where the nature, origin and construction of *sex* (not only of gender) is under scrutiny (see the most prominent example in Judith Butler's work³¹), it seems licit here not to deepen the discussion on an essentialist position. Moreover, borrowing Buckingham's words, to "accept that women had an irreducible 'female essence' would be tantamount to admitting that others distinguished by 'difference' (such as minority ethnic populations, disabled people or gay men and women, and men more widely) could be driven to behave in similarly 'essential' ways, which, by definition, would be unchanging and unchangeable, an argument that social scientists have been working hard to refute for many years" (Buckingham 2004: 147), and which few feminist could welcome.

The two remaining options have much in common, and present many points of connection, since none of the two deny the importance of both the superstructure of ideological and cultural norms and of the material structures (for examples of this proximity and intersection of the two perspectives see Agarwal 1992: 121 ff; Mellor 2000). The work of Carolyn Merchant has for example opened very relevant views, highlighting the conceptual connection between the women's and nature's oppression/exploitation, that Merchant roots in the oppositional dualism man/nature in the western culture, as emerged with the formation of modern western scientific thought and the Enlightenment (1989). Nowadays, most of the scholars belonging to the feminist tradition agree on a large part of Merchant's analysis. The real difference shown by more materialistic positions is to be found in the *balance* between the role of structure and superstructure, in what is seen as predominant factor behind the oppression of women, if cultural constructions and ideologies or discourses.

Some general and particular aspects tend to lean in favour of the materialist explanation. As suggested by Agarwal, in her critiques to the symbolic/conceptual explanation when commenting Merchant's writings, the cultural explanation, even if in many ways it gives a positive contribution to explaining the linkage, shows some problems (1992). As the results of the field study seem to confirm, a cultural orientation has a weakness in front of forms of oppression that do not see gender as the only variable, but present gender as a dimension that interplays with other factors as class or race. Posing the focus of the linkage women- nature in culture or ideology (even if it has given important results) seems to have fallacies in explaining the variability of women's closeness to nature, which vary with class and position in the productive structure, as witnessed by the results of the interviews presented in Part I. The ideological or cultural 'family' of explanations tends in other words not to give enough *pondus* to materiality, to the structures of economic nature that form reality and the lived experience, even with regards to women and nature. It is the materiality of the life condition (and in the specific class belonging) that constrains women to the 'privileged'

³⁰ That gender is socially constructed is almost universally accepted, at least in gender studies, even if it is declined in many different ways.

³¹ see e.g. (Butler and Sahin (ed.) 2004).

relationship to nature, here to water. Concerning the relationship between materiality, conceptualizations and ideology, it is worth to cite a paragraph by Agarwal:

Hence, insofar as there is a gender and class (/caste/race)-based division of labor and distribution of property and power, gender and class (/caste/race) structure people's interactions with nature and so structure the effects of environmental change on people and their responses to it. And where knowledge about nature is experiential in its basis, the divisions of labor, property, and power which shape experience also shape the knowledge based on that experience. (1992: 126)

Agarwal also argues that, in relation to nature, one sees a mediation by class of the gendered effects (ibid). I would argue that it is possibly the other way around, i.e. what is seen as implication of changes in the environmental conditions (in the specific access to water) mirror the mediation of class effects by gender.

At this point, as a bridge towards next section, it can be useful to mention the comprehensive theoretical analysis by Mary Mellor, who addresses the linkage women-nature by questioning the whole economic structure of western capitalism. "Patriarchal capitalism", as an economic and politic power structure, not as an ideology, is depicted an immanently oppressive and exploitative system. Mellor sees the western system as one in which power consists in "the ability of certain individuals and groups to free themselves... from embodiedness and embeddedness, from ecological time and biological time" (Mellor 1997: 188). The way to reach this freedom is through the 'exploitation' of groups used as "mediators" between the dominating strata and nature, meaning the material substrate of life (biological and natural time, embodiedness, etc). This structure implies relations of domination (analogous to the domination on nature), and has historically implied the subordination of women (and other oppressed groups, and similarly in nature), and their relegation in the reproductive sphere, in a subordinated hierarchical position (ibid.). It is this role of mediator, according to Mellor, that gives origin to the women's closeness to nature, and to water in this specific case, by allocating to women the responsibility to manage water, and to perform the 'material' tasks to it connected (ibid.). The empirical evidence from the fieldwork can constitute a contribution to this view: the linkage between the interviewees and water (and material nature, also via other tasks as childbearing, cleaning and cooking) seemed to be very rooted in the material division of tasks and structures inside the household. Even the class-determined differences might not be an element against this perspective. On the contrary, the differentiation among social strata seems to be a confirmation of the material nature of the link. Even if "equally women" (i.e. showing almost the same attributes typical of the female 'role', as in their look, gestures etc.), the women belonging to different classes showed different closeness to the 'materiality' of water, as witnessed by the awareness of the consumed amount and by their role as providers. This can be interpreted as an indication of the fact that the difference in the nature of the link had structural more than ideological origins, and was grounded in the materiality of the division of tasks of the households.

9.2 Gender and economy/ economical development and structures

Another way to analyze the differential effects of privatization on women is to approach the issue from an economical point of view, and to refer to the debate in the fields of gender and development and of feminist economics. In order to begin the discussion, the two simple empirical evidences of which above suggest parting the analysis, at a first stage, between the macro-level (social groups) and the micro level (household).

9.2.1 The macro-level: an intersection of social class and gender

The empirical evidence from the study indicates that water privatization has different effects at the macro-level: the access to water and the consequences of the privatization are different among different 'women'. The consequences of privatization (in terms of access, price etc) in lower class women cannot be found for the middle class. This mirrors the fact that the category 'women' as organic and non-problematized unit of analysis does not explain the reality of water privatization and its effects. As several other situations show, the category 'women' – apart from the risks of heteronormativity³² that it carries along – is not enough to explain reality, even when looking from a gender perspective. The outcomes of privatization, especially in a setting like Buenos Aires, do not affect all women in the same way, mostly because of class belonging, but also because of place of residence (not exactly coincident with class). Those factors of differentiation among women imply differences not only in some practical but relevant aspects (access to tap water, material comforts and instruments), but also to structural features of the division of tasks, roles and power between women and men. This fact does not necessary mean that 'women' as a category can not be used as a descriptive, 'situated' analytical tool, and it does not deny that there are certain (many) forms of discrimination and oppression that are exercised on women as such³³. The concept of *intersectionality* (see e.g. De los Reyes and Mulinari 2005; McCall 2005) demonstrates its validity here, and at the same time witnesses the potentiality of gender as an analytical tool, even beyond the category of 'women'. When looking at intersectionality as "the relationships among multiple dimensions and modalities of social relations and subject formations" (McCall 2005: 1771), the use of rigid isolated categories (or even the use of categories at all) is questioned. The conceptualization of women as an organic category, relatively common in certain feminist streams in the past³⁴, is object of a serious critique. What intersectionality suggests here is to analyze a certain reality as an intersection of planes of belonging, of different identities that qualify and determine one's position and situation of life, or that, in more theoretical terms, represent a set of analytical categories all necessary for a complete understanding and explanation of a certain reality.

The "instability of the category 'women'" (Barker 2005) calls not for a marginalization of gender, but for an integration of it, or even better for a broadening, which in reality gives to the gender perspective the scope and potentiality that it has. As clearly shown e.g. by Karen Warren's work, gender means more than analyzing men and women and their differential roles (2000). Following the hints given by several ecofeminists, Warren gives, starting from gender, a comprehensive analysis to the 'others' as the category of the excluded/oppressed – to which women often belong (Warren 2000: ch.3). By highlighting the common features of different forms of oppression, Warren shows the broader scope of gender studies, and its implications e.g. in the discussion of ecology and environment (ibid).

Through intersectionality, the profound questioning of the category 'women' implies the introduction of broader sets of analytical concepts and categories besides sex and gender in the literal meaning, although more as an integration than an 'overcoming'. The sex/gender dimension goes along with ethnicity, class, religion, geographical zone, and so on. This integration of other forms of domination is not surprising, given

³² According to Kathy Cohen, heteronormativity is "the system which prescribes, enjoins, rewards, and naturalizes a particular kind of heterosexuality – monogamous, reproductive, and based on conventional complementary gender roles – as the norm on which social arrangements should be based" (2005: 489). For some everyday-life examples see (McCarl Nielsen et al. 2000).

³³ Thus, the critique of the use of the category 'women' done here is not meant to extend to ideological and political movements which pose being women as a basis of the analysis of reality, and of political struggles.

³⁴ Agarwal (1992: 122) and Mohanty (1997: 81ff) provide powerful critiques.

the roots of feminist and gender studies, political at least equally than academic, and traditionally bound to a struggle of emancipation³⁵.

The concept of intersectionality – at least in this case – allows explaining the empirical evidence by applying several categories and women is one of them, the main at the household level. The (simplified) version of intersectionality presented here is one among the several present in gender studies. McCall defines three types of intersectionality: “anticategorical”, “intracategorical” and “intercategorical” (2005). The type of intersectionality used here is closer to the last two, since here categories (specifically ‘woman’) are criticized as static and incomplete, but still it is used “strategically”, on the contrary to what done according to anticategorical intersectionality (ibid.). The ‘intracategoricity’ of the study resides in that it “tend[s] to focus on particular social groups at neglected points of intersection” (ibid: 1774), i.e. women in disadvantaged situation, living in the margins of society. This special ‘point of intersection’ is also compared to other groups (the main feature of intercategorical intersectionality), i.e. women of higher social class.

9.2.2 The micro-level: the intra-household dimension

As if the defence done above of gender as a perspective (and as a category of analysis) was not enough, it can be useful to point out that at the household level gender (/sex) becomes a factor of differentiation in a way that many other dimensions/identifiers do not. With the words of Malhotra et al., “household and interfamilial relations are a central locus of women’s disempowerment in a way that is not true for other disadvantaged groups”(2002: 5), as e.g. groups individuated on the basis of race, cast or religion.

There are several ways to address the discrimination/difference of women inside the household, and the variety of approaches mirrors the centrality of the theme in feminist and gender studies. Behind all the possible interpretations, rests the fact that women in most societies have been in charge of the tasks related to what is traditionally labelled as ‘non-productive’/reproductive activities, as child nurturing, food cooking and preparation, washing etc; this division of tasks has radically influenced the role of women in productive economy (Benería and Sen 1981: 2196; Barker 2005). All activities that in some way have lead women to be in charge of activities connected to water, and to the provision of water (Aureli and Brelet 2004: 9).

The traditionally rigid³⁶ differentiation of roles (per se or because of its implications) has been individuated as a form of oppression/discrimination of women and as an obstacle to overcome in order to achieve women’s empowerment (Benería and Sen 1981; World Bank 2001; Barker 2005). At this point different paradigms and standpoints split, take separate paths, both with regards to the individuation of the origin of the ‘oppression’/rigid division and to the possible ways to overcome it. The diagnosis of women’s segregation in the reproductive sphere is very often in close connection with the economic recipes/models in order to improve women’s conditions, and in general that of the disadvantaged. It is a hard task to present the myriad of nuances that liven up the academic and ideological discussion. Although acknowledging the roughness implicit in the simplification, for the sake of this work, different positions are grouped into two macro-families, divided – very roughly – on the basis of the view of the role of modernization and of market.

9.3 The liberal tradition

The first answer/paradigm comes from scholars who in a broad sense share a liberal view. The tradition labelled as Woman In Development (WID) can be presented as a representative stream, as an example and a precursor of this tradition, rooted in the work of Boserup (Visvanathan et al. 1997; Barker 2005). The root of

³⁵ See an example of the discussion of this point by Ramazanoglu (2002).

³⁶ Rigid, but variable in form and attributes with space, time and settings.

the gender inequality – at least at the intra-household level – is seen primarily in women’s exclusion from the process of development, in the marginalization outside the economic/productive sphere, ‘locked’ by patriarchal structures in pre-modern patterns that originate their oppression. Consequently, the solution is represented in the insertion of women into the process of development and roughly speaking into the market, into the ‘productive’³⁷ economy, basically the insertion into the circle of ‘modernity’ (Barker 2005: 2201). A lot has been written since the appearance of WID, and liberal gender scholars can not be identified with WID: present works have overcome many of the problems (see e.g. Visvanathan et al. 1997: ch.1) identified by critics in the analysis proposed by WID. However, most of the liberal tradition in the field, nuanced in a broad range of different positions, shares the same fundamental view. In this way, even if problematized and nuanced, insertion into the modern structure of production is seen as the dynamic to rely on to overcome women’s oppression. A report by King and Mason explains how economic development (in the capitalistic, modern connotation) is one of the main dynamics to favour in order to overcome gender discrimination and patriarchal structures, even at the intra-household level (World Bank 2001, see in particular ch.3). Even if acknowledging the fact that economical (capitalist) development does not automatically imply an improvement of women’s condition, it is seen, mediated by policies focused on gender, as one of the main recipes to overcome gender inequality, or at least as the economical structure that will support the achievement of women’s empowerment (ibid).

Kabeer, with her studies about Bangladesh, provides another example of the attribution of a positive emancipatory role to markets and capitalism via employment in the ‘productive’ (modern) sphere. The researcher presents a very nuanced and balanced view, and does not omit to analyze problems associated with the insertion of women into the wage labour market. For instance, Kabeer discusses the exploitative conditions they often are inserted into, or the fact that in many cases, even if with employment, gender segregation remains a sharp trait of the society, or even acknowledging the fact that in many cases few women have been inserted into the formal, productive market (Kabeer 2004). However, the conclusion of the researcher is that economical development through an increase of the ‘modern’ economy – and the opportunities carried along by female insertion in the workforce – in most cases represent an improvement of women’s material and social conditions. The improvement would go via the acquisition of bargaining power thanks to the wages, because of an increased ‘reputation’ thanks to the fact of being a worker and of the change in economical role in the household (see Barrientos and Kabeer 2004; Kabeer 2004).

A very brief and effective, even if less nuanced, expression of these views is given in the World Bank action plan named “Gender Equality as smart economics” (World Bank 2006: 2). Economic empowerment (read mobilization of female work force and women’s involvement in the productive economy) is seen as the main dynamic to eradicate gender inequality, so that “the global community must renew its attention to women’s economic empowerment and increase investments in women”(World Bank 2006: 2).

9.4 The critics

Another broad grouping of answers is the one of those who, in several different ways, question the potentiality of the modernization and of insertion into the capitalistic market to free women. Those non-homogeneous grouping shares a critique of the liberal model and in many of its exponents is rooted in socialistic or Marxist theories.

³⁷ The use done here of the word productive mimics the traditional conception, but does not imply a consensus by the author on the dichotomy productive/reproductive sphere.

With their critiques to Boserup's work, Lourdes Benería and Gita Sen offer a clear example of this stream. In their work in 1981, they provide a view of modernization almost opposite to the liberal one:

Modernization is not a neutral process, but one that obeys the dictates of capitalist accumulation and profit making ... [t]he problem for women is not only the lack of participation in this process as equal partners with men; it is a system that generates and intensifies inequalities, making use of existing gender hierarchies to place women in subordinate positions at each different level of interaction between class and gender. This is not to deny the possibility that capitalist development might break down certain social rigidities oppressive to women. But these liberating tendencies are accompanied by new forms of subordination. (Benería and Sen 1981: 290)

The extract above shows a vision common to several critics of development. One of the points is the idea that the capitalistic system, which liberals (more or less problematically) rely on, has *intrinsically* elements of oppression that are going to maintain women's subordination and oppression. This view does not deny the existence of positive effects of the opening of societies to 'modern capitalism' and market, as well as women's entering this labour system, such as the beneficial effects reported by Kabeer (2004). Lourdes Benería is explicit on this: "[t]he market can have positive effects, such as the breaking up of patriarchal traditions or the curtailment of arranged marriages that limit individual autonomy ... [and] can accelerate the diffusion of both "liberating" and "sexist" practices" (1999: 73). Liberal scholars, as discussed above, do present a nuanced view of capitalism. E.g. a 'non-socialist' like Barker expresses concerns about the implication of capitalism, claiming that "[e]ntering the world of paid work can no longer be regarded as necessarily contributing to women's empowerment" (2005: 2203). Nowadays, liberals in general acknowledge that the emancipating power of employment depends on a series of conditions, of 'intersectional' prerequisites that have to be present. But views critical of capitalism, belonging to this broad second family, tend to see women's oppression as more or less structurally, necessarily implied by such a type of economic structure, not only accidental events, not unsuccessful accidental outcomes to avoid (Benería and Sen 1981).

A useful concept that can be borrowed to explain the critics' standpoint is that of oppressive conceptual frameworks by Karen Warren (2000: 46 ff). With her definition of oppressive framework, Warren gives a hint to the reading of the phenomenon, both at the macro and the micro level. With the words of the philosopher, "an oppressive conceptual framework is one that functions to explain, maintain and "justify" relationships of unjustified domination and subordination. When an oppressive conceptual framework is patriarchal, it functions to justify the subordination of women by men" (Warren 2000: 46). The presence of an oppressive framework in the society in the Argentinean context (see ch.5) implied the fact that the changes introduced by market expansion from within the same framework have not contributed to women's empowerment, it has reinforced the mechanisms of oppression instead³⁸.

Another example of a critical standpoint (even if not done from a technical/economic point of view) is the already cited analysis by Mary Mellor presented above with the concept of mediator. The analysis by Mellor points to economical structures, and in particular capitalism, as the main factor behind women's exploitation. Some sentences by Mary Mellor highlight the interplay by her concept of 'mediator' and intersectionality:

³⁸ Warren's notion of "oppressive conceptual framework" is not incompatible with a materialistic view, since a materialistic standpoint does not deny the importance of ideology and conceptual constructions, and since Warren's concept per se does not imply that the origin of the framework is not in a material structure, and that it is functional to a material structure.

Many people stand in complex networks of mediation. Mediation is not only carried out by women, in fact, many women are themselves the beneficiaries of mediation. White western women may mediate biological time for their family, but exploit the labor of others, the resources of the South, and the sustainability of the Earth. Many people live in complex networks of mediation on the basis of 'race,' class, gender, or ethnicity. (2000: 113)

Mellor's view gives account if the different 'levels of mediation' women of different classes live in, not in a marginal way, but integrally. The fact that middle class women do not suffer the same effects of water privatization would be seen as the confirmation that the intensity of the role of mediator varies when ascending the hierarchy of 'distance' from nature, of liberation from the "embodiedness and embeddedness" (Mellor 1997: 188).

9.5 Feminists theories and the empirical evidence

The concept of 'mediation' of which above very well fits to the empirical evidence presented in the first part of this work. The results of the fieldwork show that water 'disappears' from the lives of the more well-off families and strata of the population. With a tap connection and an affordable price, the access to water is taken for granted and the collection of water ceases to be a task. (see ch.6.2.4 and 6.2.2). Water is not, in that context, a factor that can reveal any gendered structure or division of tasks, at least not strictly speaking. In more theoretical terms, the role of 'mediator' with nature historically (at least in patriarchal societies, such as the Argentinean) 'reserved' to women assumes different nuances depending on the 'structure of production' at the household level. In a context as Barrio Obrero or Ciudad Oculta, the 'tougher' life conditions 'keep' women (mostly women in a patriarchal society, but for sure also men, to a certain extent) close to the materiality of nature, as shown with regards to water. Different is the case for the middle-class of the interviews. So to say, when ascending the social scale or the 'level of modernity'/freedom from embodiment in the habits and life conditions, lifestyle is modified in such a way that the role of mediator takes a less marked character. The role is still embodied by women (giving birth to child, being employed in health-care related sectors, nurturing children, being in charge of the housework), but the 'de-materialization' of the life conditions implies that, at least with regards to water, women do not need anymore to uphold the 'physical' connection to nature, they just have to open the tap. The two dimensions of class belonging (that in the Argentinean context almost completely determines the 'degree of modernity' of lifestyle) and gender are revealed also by this context as two closely interrelated analytical categories.

It is out of the scope of this work to determine which theoretical paradigm better explains the exploitation of women and other marginalized groups, if this is an achievable goal at all. Nevertheless, some traits of the evolution of the Argentinean situation (see Part I) and some hints from the fieldwork seem to indicate that, at least in the limited setting and time period of concern, the views critical to the liberal paradigm to a larger extent can give an accurate account of the situation. When considering the evolution of the women's situation in Buenos Aires and in general Argentina during the 90s, some indications can be given about the relationship between the Argentinean capitalism and women's situation. The period has surely witnessed an enhancement and expansion of the market mechanisms, and the wave of privatizations (among those the privatization of the water and sanitation utility) were an expression of the political attempt to enhance and free market forces (Azipazu and Basualdo 2004). As others have shown (see e.g. Lo Vuolo and Pautassi 1998, discussed in ch 5.2), the insertion into the labour force of a relevant number of women has not implied an improvement for the general conditions of women. On the contrary, the economic and social reforms of the 90s have exposed women of the lower classes, whose starting position was already fragile, to a worsening of their economic conditions. Moreover, it has implied the development of new forms

of discrimination, as with regards to precarious working condition and the increase in work load implied by the employment in the 'productive' system (without equally drastic changes in the household division of tasks, see ch. 5.2).

The reforms of the 90s 'mobilized' resources and achieved, at least in the first part of the decade, a considerable economic growth, and an increase in women's employment in the productive economy. But, at least in the Argentinean context, this has implied that the exposed group of low-class women has been further penalized (see ch. 5.2). The insertion into the productive sphere, the progressive opening of the society to market and to 'modern' economy for the already discriminated part of the female population has generally implied a re-enforcing of the structure of oppression. The acceleration of capitalistic mechanisms seems therefore not to have benefited the marginalized, and in the specific women in the lower income strata of the population, in precarious situations and less qualified (in term of professional education) (Lo Vuolo and Pautassi 1998; García 2003).

This dynamic seems not to confirm the analysis pursued by the liberal feminist 'family'. The insertion into the job market seems to have penalized more than empower Argentinean women, whose fragile position (discriminated in the work market and pushed into by economical problems in the households) has been 'exploited' and the pattern of discrimination re-enforced (see ch.5.2).

It is appropriate to answer an objection that could be raised to this reading of the situation. The objection refers to the alternative women had, and a comparison of the present employment to such alternatives. Kabeer's study in Bangladesh could be borrowed as an example. The researcher points out the fact that the employment for women working in conditions 'bad' according to 'western' standards did not represent a worsening of their conditions, but an opportunity when seen from 'below', from the point of view of the workers (2004). On the contrary the employment was seen by the workers themselves (as reported by Kabeer's study) as an opportunity and, even in conditions of at least partial exploitation, a change better than the alternative, mainly work in informal economy and staying at home (ibid.). Such an argument, whose validity is not questioned here when referred to other contexts, does not fit the Argentinean case. Here women entering the labour market seem not to have done so as a choice 'away' from a worse: in the Argentinean case, the entry into the job market, good or bad, seems to have been caused more by the dynamics ignited by the reforms in the economy and by the need for additional incomes in the household. It is not the same situation as the one depicted by Kabeer, where women becoming wage-takers – even if in non-optimal condition – do that also since it implies an empowerment, or a larger freedom (Kabeer 2004): what happened in Argentina looks more as a choice due to necessity. In Argentina, where once again 'modernization' and modernity – in the meaning given to it by Barrancos (2006) – did not keep the same pace, and the entry into the labour force did not imply radical changes in the gendered structures in the households (see ch. 5.2). More precisely, changes in the households have taken place, but apparently not in the direction of women's empowerment. The 'malefication' of unemployment and the crisis that this has implied for many men, to be seen in parallel with the considerable entry into the labour force of women, has crated unbalances in the households (interview with Marisú Devoto), but probably not any empowering effects for women.

Once again, it has to be noted that the analysis and reflections here developed do not logically imply that market / capitalism cannot provide improvements in women situation. In simple words, it is not that if it did not work in Argentina during the 90s it cannot work at all. The literature about the relationship feminism-capitalism is enormous, and these reflections can only represent a limited contribution in a very rich debate. However, the description of the Argentinean situation in the 90s (drawn here mainly from secondary sources, see ch.5) hints to doubting that market/capitalism alone can solve the gender inequality. What the case shows

is that the increase of the female rate of active population, the increase in employed women and a period of economic growth did not lead – not necessarily – to an improvement in the conditions of the marginalized. The interpretation here proposed is that this happened – or better did not happen – in Argentina because of a structure – material – of oppression, that was not affected by the expansion of the capitalistic and modern dynamics. This does not prove the falsity of the liberal point of view, even in case any observer agreed the reflections developed here: a contrary case is not a confutation. In any case, this discussion sounds, at least, as an alarm on the positive implications of capitalism for the overcoming of patriarchal structures, and, with the words of Barker, reminds of the “need to look on this sudden convergence of feminist interests with the interests of global capitalism with a critical eye” (2005: 2202). At least as a further contribution questioning the necessity of the link capitalism – emancipation.

It would be faulty – and unjust – to ascribe the maternity of privatization and of water privatization in the specific, to the tradition of gender scholars here labelled as liberals. The support to privatization and to the withdrawal of the State from many sectors can historically be linked to the spread of neo-liberalism, more than to development and gender scholars belonging to liberal feminist tradition. The focus given by international organizations (as World Bank, IMF and others) to a larger involvement for private initiative, to the opening of the economy and to the shrinking of the room occupied by the State is one of the main causes, as the participation and sponsoring by the World Bank to many projects of water privatization witnesses (Finger and Allouche 2002; Gleick et al. 2002). The neo-liberal doctrines, the Washington Consensus, and the recipes behind structural adjustment are surely at least the ‘moral origins’ of the political line behind privatization and liberalizations (Shiva 1989; Idelovitch and Ringskog 1995; Arrighi 2002; Gleick et al. 2002; GWA 2006). The wave of privatizations that characterized Argentina during the 90s and the economical reforms introduced in the same period are the result of the declination in the local language (and especially through the figure of Menem) of those international tendencies and political lines.

What is then the connection between liberalism and privatization? What is underlined here is the fact that the same tendencies shown by the market with regards to women’s employment are shown, in the analyzed case, by the mechanisms and dynamics ignited by privatization. Moreover, the faith in the emancipatory potentiality of capitalism as economic system raises concerns both at the household level and on the macro-scale. The linkage here rests in the system’s oppressive /marginalizing features, which tend to hit/damage the weakest /most exposed, that are individuated by different ‘intersections’ of categories in different situations. So that, as expressed a while ago by Benería, capitalism shows clearly – even if not always – negative effects that harm the weak and, even worse, result in re-enforcing the dynamics of oppression and marginalization, also because of the presence of structures of capitalism that benefit from gender inequality (1997). Capitalism presents strains – not easily conceivable –between the private and the public interest (ibid.). The ‘invisible hand’ very often seems to take from the weak to give to the mighty, a problem not only in this case from a gender perspective, but more in general also when striving to sustainability. The opening to the market of the provision of water services, has shown not to respond to social goals: the marginalized stratum of the population (those once called the poor) have been in many cases excluded from improvements, and left in a situation of precarious access, when resources (see the high profitability of AASA, ch. 4.2) would have been available. Given the material connection between women and nature, in the specific of water, and the related positioning of lower class women in an intersection of different forms of oppression, which poses them in one of the most fragile intersection in the population, the mechanism of market (i.e. capitalism) may imply negative consequences.

An objection which could be raised to the analysis provided here is that the outcomes of every reform and economic structure depend on the conditions in which those ‘recipes’ are applied. It is true that some of

the treats Argentina had at the beginning of the 90s are among the ones often named as dangerous for the success of capitalism, as a weak ruling class inclined to patronage, inequality and, concerning gender, a clear patriarchal structure of discrimination. Strictly speaking, a liberal feminist answer to the claims here presented would be that what said above is not in contrast with a liberal feminist analysis. Following the logic line of liberal feminism, a supporter of this paradigm would argue that both the increase of women's participation to the labour market and the water privatization did not have positive effects not because of the two phenomena per se, but because of the substrate they were applied to. The supporter would argue that the substrate conditioned the outcomes of the changes by presenting gender discrimination and an unequal access to economy for women. Two responses can be given to such an objection. The first one is that Argentina presented one of the conditions often heard for capitalism: the country had in the past one of the largest middle class in south America, a continent which is not really famous for it (Turner and Carballo 2005: 183 ff). Through a process started already during the dictatorship (1976-1983), the social and class conformation of the country change, with a growing polarization and concentration of the wealth. The reforms applied to Argentina in the 90s enlarged the gaps and led to the accumulation of capital in fewer hands, and a sharp increase in inequity (Salvia and Donza 2001; Turner and Carballo 2005). In one decade, the Gini coefficient increased from 0,426 of the early 90s to 0,504 of year 2000, and the economic conditions of the working class worsened and the income gaps considerably increased (Salvia and Donza 2001; Turner and Carballo 2005). Thus the inequality, even if pre-existent, was enhanced by the decade of the 90s.

The second, more substantial response is that, following the rationale here presented, the logic consequence for liberal feminism would be that water privatization, in order to benefit and not to harm women, should be applied only to contexts where women are not economically and socially marginalized in a way that can cause the phenomenon to reinforce the mechanisms of discrimination. In simple words: that oppressed women should be 'protected' from water privatization, as a change that has at least the potentiality to imply negative consequences in reason of the pre-existing structures of oppression. If this logical conclusion is accepted, it represents a very large limitation of the possible field of application of water privatization, and as a serious questioning of market instruments as a suitable solution for water management in many developing countries.

10. Case study and generalization: a limitation?

Before commenting and summing up the results of the fieldwork and the reflections of the theoretical analysis, it is worth making a methodological notation. The fieldwork was done through qualitative interviews, with interviewees chosen without any ambition of statistical relevance, and in a number clearly too limited to be considered a statistical sample of the Buenos Aires population. Moreover, the results of this type of research are clearly not suitable to any kind of quantitative elaboration. Apart from the interviews, being the study the inquiry of a single, specific and limited case, the particular results from the work cannot be generalized. Applying the conclusions that can be drawn from a case study to the generality is a methodologically and scientifically questionable idea (Bryman 2004: 51). As in every case study, many are the 'secondary' variables that influence the outcomes of the research. In the case of Buenos Aires water privatization, this work has discussed some 'noise' factors have been discussed in the text. The deep economical reforms Argentina has gone through during the 90s, the economical and debt crisis of the beginning of 2000s, a State in certain aspects 'weak', politicized bureaucracy and public administration, a quite polarized society presenting consistent pockets of poverty and socio-economical exclusion, are examples of such elements which connote the results of the research as site-specific.

These notes should not be misinterpreted. They declare the limited possibility to generalize the conclusion of the study. However, as for case-studies in general (Yin 2003), this work has allowed to deepen the understanding of the issue by focusing on a quite profound assessment of the effects of the privatization in Buenos Aires. The interviews have provided the chance to document the respondents' situation from their point of view, highlighting their opinion and perception of the issues, thus obtaining deeper understanding than can be obtained by statistically solid quantitative research (at least in consideration of the time and resources available for this work).

Moreover, in order to legitimate the idea that at least some of the conclusions drawn here can represent insights pertinent also to other contexts, it can be noted that many of the 'noise' factors of which above (e.g. presence of poverty, or of weak State) are common to many of the contexts – especially developing countries – where access to water represent a serious problem and where the recipe of water privatization has applied most often. Without the existence of those problems, there would be no need for us to write and read about sustainability, gender and empowerment.

11. Concluding reflections

The compatibility of water privatization to the goals of social sustainability and thus the balance between economic benefits (read efficiency) and social benefits (improvement of the condition of the disadvantaged strata of the population) was a central theme for the present work. This paper argues that the Buenos Aires privatization does not appear as the best solution from the point of view of the social targets connected to water provision. Aguas Argentinas' opportunistic behaviour (high profitability and parallel tariff increases, with limited own capital investments), the exclusion of non-profitable areas from the network extension, and the differential effects of water exclusion suffered by lower class women ground this reading of the case.

The second part of the work integrated the evidence from the Buenos Aires case with a discussion about the linkage women-nature and about the interplay gender-economy. The discussion carried out seems to suggest that not only the 'critical' feminist tradition, but even the liberal feminism 'family' would conclude that, at least in disadvantaged intersections of society (as lower class women), capitalistic/market instruments tend not to favour the overcoming of patriarchal oppressive structures, but on the contrary might exacerbate them. Even the liberal feminist tradition would acknowledge, following the reasoning presented in Part II, that, in order to contribute to a reduction of socio-economical marginalization of women, water management should not rely mainly on the mechanisms of the private sector (capitalism, market, pricing), at least not in situations similar to Buenos Aires.

The concept of intersectionality confirmed its powerfulness in the discussion and was decisive to show the broad scope of a gender perspective even when fronting the 'instability' of the category 'women', which emerged both from the empirical evidence and the theoretical discussion.

As a last remark, it seems appropriate to suggest that the discussion about privatization should not be reduced to the question of whether or not to do anything in the face of very poor performance and provided services (as in the case of OSN). The sometimes problematic relationship between women's empowerment and market mechanism underlines the fact that the issue of water services provision and social sustainability is more complex than just addressing the inefficiency of public providers. A more fair and fertile approach would be to assess the different possible alternatives for improving the situation. This implies that the best way to evaluate the outcomes of water privatization would not be to compare it with what would have happened if nothing had been done. Critiques based on the evaluation of the outcomes against the goals should be preserved, aware of the fact that the eradication of gender discrimination requires structural

changes – beyond an increase in efficiency – and can not be achieved without serious analysis of gender differential effects of the proposed measures.

12. What's next? – Directions for future research

Sustainability, gender and development, access to water and natural resource. The present work has been an attempt, with a single case as starting point, to give a contribution to the existing rich discussion about those topics. The aim was to do this by creating some conceptual bridges and connections among issues – as gender and water privatization – that have not been addressed extensively together. The hope is to open some room for questioning and problematization, and, if the question can hardly be new, the wish is to contribute – as little as possible in such a limited work – to reformulate those questions, to pose them from an angle different from usual.

Some examples of questions the present work touched and that could represent the next challenges are:

- *Intersectionality*. The validity of the concept receives another confirmation from this work. Broadening the scope of the analysis of access to water and privatization – here limited to gender and class as main ‘categories’ – to other dimensions (as ethnicity, culture, and geography), considering more complex intersection could originate fruitful research;
- *Scarcity*. The theme of the ‘discourse’ of scarcity (on the traces of Lyla Mehta (2000)) and its different origins and interpretations – even if not deepened here – emerges even from this work, which reports the paradox of the city of Buenos Aires, where the abundant available water resources do not imply a universal access for the population. The insights from this work could represent a useful starting point for an integration of the gender perspective into the assessment of the mechanisms and dynamics – beyond physical constraints – that generate and origin scarcity;
- The strains or concerns between the mechanisms of privatization and social sustainability (some of which have been discussed here, mainly focusing on gender as a factor of exclusion) deserve to be further analyzed. The dependency of the outcomes of water privatization on a number of factors (as existing socio-economical structures, political institutions, mechanisms of marginalization and discrimination) seem to indicate the impossibility of a generally valid (and ideologically based) judgement about the phenomenon. But for cases which present pre-conditions similar to Buenos Aires, some insights from this work could be taken as stimulus for more research about alternatives to the management of water under market mechanisms and the principles of private sector. Alternatives to privatization that, instead of aggravating pre-existent conditions of discrimination and marginalization, can generate positive dynamics of development and liberation from “unfreedoms”.

During the last months’ work, many times something curious occurred. When I told friends and colleagues about the topic of my thesis – ‘gender and water privatization’ – their reaction was more than once puzzled and there was a wondering expression on their faces. The more sympathetic of them became concerned for me, and for the success of my work. Behind polite reactions and wondering expressions lied some scepticism or perplexity: gender and water privatization? What’s the point?

The hope is that this work – with the questions it tries to raise – is a good answer.

13. References

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14. Appendix 1- Guidelines for the Interviews

This guide (as described in chapter 6.1), was used during the interviews.

1. Presentation of the interviewer and of the work

2. General information about the interviewees and their families

- a. Name, place of birth, age, etc.
- b. Familiar status (children, husbands) and Household (how many live there etc)
- c. Incomes and sources of incomes of the family
- d. Use of the incomes and their distribution of resources among the family members
- e. Division of tasks/roles in the family
- f. What are the main problems, issues and positive features of the area of residence

3. Access to Water, and gender aspects

- a. Modality of access to water
 - i. Reliability
 - ii. Quality of the water
 - iii. Opinions about their access
- b. Usages of water in their household
- c. Amount of water consumed by the household
- d. Price of water
- e. Problems related to water
- f. Perception of the problems related to water
- g. Effects of issues related to water on the family members
- h. Problems caused by eventual lack of water for specific water usages
- i. Responsibility of the water problems and possible solutions

4. Privatization: effects and perceptions

- a. Opinion about water privatization
- b. Perceived effects of Privatization
- c. Contacts with the company