



Global South Conversations on COVID-19 and housing struggles

Housing struggles and domestic territories in Argentina during the pandemic

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Abstract

In this conversation two of our Editors (Solange and Ana) met with the Argentine researchers and organisers, Lucia Cavallero, Verónica Gago and Florencia Presta to learn about the increase in housing violence and struggles for housing and home in Argentina during the pandemic. They describe the intensification of ‘landlord violence’ and land seizures as well as an ‘implosion of home’ as a result of accelerated indebtedness and impoverishment. We tackle issues of feminist spatiality and femicide in the pandemic including how housing and feminist struggles intersect.

Keywords

Argentina, housing, feminism, landlord violence, implosion of home

RHJ: The pandemic has brought new challenges for housing struggles and ways we inhabit our homes. How has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted housing struggles, the communities and issues that you work on in Argentina?

Lucía: The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the economic crisis that the country had already been experiencing since 2018 under the previous government of Mauricio Macri. Poverty and indigence rates reached historic records. During the Covid pandemic there were layoffs, suspensions and an acceleration of labor precariousness, added to high

inflation due to the generalized price hikes applied by large food producing and marketing companies. We investigated the emergence of new household debt during the pandemic, such as rent and utility debt. Thus, the labor problems of the majority of the population coincided with the intensification of the profits of sectors of the economy such as platform companies, banks and privatized utility companies. The government implemented a series of subsidies for the most precarious population, which consisted of a very modest amount for around 11 million people, at the same time that it subsidized companies to sustain formal employment.

COVID-19 has unleashed a crisis in access to housing in several ways. First, this is due to the accumulation of rental debts as a prelude to evictions. This problem has arisen for two reasons: an uncontrolled price increase in rents and the labor problems of the majority of the population during the pandemic. As a product of this proliferation of evictions, land seizures have appeared. In other words, the same people who are being evicted due to the accumulation of rent debt, have taken land in different peripheral areas of the Province of Buenos Aires. Among those most affected by this generalized problem of housing are women and the LGTBIQ+ population. The Housing Crisis has also manifested itself in what we have called "landlord violence" to name the ways in which landlords and real estate companies have perpetrated abuses and mistreatment on this population in order to accelerate the eviction processes [that are supposed to be] prohibited by the government. On the other hand, there is the situation of access to housing for the most precarious population living in informal neighborhoods (*barrios populares*). In these areas, the mandate to 'stay at home' and the restriction on mobility has increased overcrowding. Evictions have also increased, even more violently, in the informal rental market.

Verónica: From a space of militancy and feminist theorizing we have been problematizing the domestic space for a long time, especially thanks to the massification of the feminist movement occurring in the streets and also in people's homes. This has made the discussion broader and more inclusive, for example in reference to domestic work in the home; who does it, under what conditions, and how are gender mandates updated in this historical moment? Also, as we have been working on, how does the domestic space include other territories related to spaces of extended social reproduction? Like domestic territories that are communities and neighborhoods, and that cannot simply be reduced to the confines of the family home. Faced with the demands of the health crisis, these issues became even more acute and relevant. In our book *A Feminist Reading of the Debt* (Pluto Press 2021), we already spoke of the 'implosion of homes' to account for how domestic violence folds inward and also of domestic indebtedness as a way of dealing with the accelerated impoverishment of the most precarious sectors. Both issues are accelerated and accentuated in the pandemic, turning the home into a fundamental terrain of conflict.

RHJ: How would you describe the response of the state? Did the new vulnerability that came with COVID-19 bring new forms of violence and oppression?

Lucía: The state has provided responses, albeit insufficient ones. First of all, evictions have been prohibited during the pandemic (decree in force until 31 March 2021). There was a whole campaign to extend it and it was not achieved, so we are in a situation that looks bad. Evictions have already begun to take place, just at the moment when we are facing the second wave of COVID. However, for the most part, real estate companies and landlords have not complied with this decree. On the other hand, the state has announced plans for the construction of housing and the allocation of lots with utilities in response to the land seizures. At the same time, the housing deficit is so entrenched that the pace of response by a state already burdened by an unsustainable public debt (caused by the previous government) is not enough.

Verónica: At the national level, the rent control law was approved in the midst of a parliamentary debate about whether or not this issue constituted part of the health emergency. So, the responses were important but, as Luci said, insufficient. Even so, they have underscored the long-standing concentration of the real estate market, and the way it is connected to the extraordinary amount of income coming from agribusiness activities. That is to say, as these superprofits have been turned into real estate investment, the increase in both land and housing prices has been generalized and today they have consolidated their dollarization. On the other hand, in the specific case of the government of the City of Buenos Aires, the association with gentrification projects and real estate speculation is so close that the impossibility for them to regulate the sector in the pandemic is evident. For example, we were researching the mechanisms of covert eviction through debt that are included in the urban redevelopment plan in a very important shanty town in Buenos Aires. That plan is based on forced relocalizations, titling through loans, and new housing built with horrible materials, which is lauded as the model for the neighborhood's modernization. Land seizures have also accelerated as a result of the most recent evictions and family situations of overcrowding and even uncontrollable violence.

Florencia: The pandemic exacerbated a situation of inequality and violence, typical of the decades-long advance of land commoditization and the consolidation of housing as an object of financial speculation in large cities. In this scenario of extreme conflict, with more than 30% of tenant households in debt, the Rent Law was passed, a demand tenants' organizations from all over the country have been making for years. Although this represents a step forward in terms of rights, the state's capacity to control its compliance in a highly informal market is still low. This is reflected in the more than ten thousand consultations received by *Inquilinos Agrupados* during 2020, where, despite the freeze dictated by the government the main concerns were linked to the increases in rent, along with the pressures, threats and harassment exerted by landlords and real estate companies to force evictions, which are also prohibited. Women are the main victims of these forms of violence, representing 70% of the consultations we received.

RHJ: How has this impacted local housing and other struggles that you have been a part of? How did existing movements react? Did new forms of organising emerge?

Lucía: This crisis has prompted the response and organization of different movements. I refer in particular to the struggle of the tenants in the organization 'Inquilinos Agrupados',

who have fought for the extension and enforcement of the decree prohibiting evictions and have succeeded in achieving a Rent Law even during the pandemic. On the other hand, social movements representing informal economy workers (organized in different dynamics of social movements and popular trade unionism) have demanded housing plans and access to land plots for self-construction. In turn, the feminist movement (see for instance: <https://www.pagina12.com.ar/328102-las-demandas-del-8-m>) has included the housing crisis in its agenda of demands because it is a crisis that directly affects the possibility of independence for women who suffer from male violence. This crisis has also meant, in particular, the intensification of forms of violence against women and the LGTBIQ+ population.

Verónica: I would point out that in the battle for public services, especially health, housing and education, we have seen a battle for the redistribution of wealth in which several movements and organizations converged (see for instance the manifesto for the 3 June demonstration, [‘Nos sostienen las redes feministas’](#)).

The class divisions that exist in the access to goods and services, their repeated processes of privatization and roll backs were questioned. Similarly, those same movements quickly denounced the existence of multiple forms of quarantine that were segmented by gender, class and race. Particularly from the feminist movement, the slogan ‘Stay at home’ was put in tension, both for what it implied in terms of violent homes as well as for the situations of overcrowding and lack of basic services. The questions ‘What home? with whom? with what income in immobility?’ were key to mapping the housing issue in its various dimensions.

RHJ: How do you see the connections between the struggles for women’s rights and housing rights in Argentina in the current context of COVID-19 and the economic crisis in the country?

Lucía: We see how the struggles for the right to housing are interconnected and become more complex with reports of the increase in male violence. The record of femicides in this time of quarantine shows something that had already been diagnosed: the implosion of homes, real fields of war for many women, lesbians, transvestites and trans women who try escape tactics and who now, virus permitting, spend 24 hours a day with their aggressors. The home cannot continue to be a place of real estate speculation nor of sexist violence. As such, when this pandemic passes there will be new opportunities in relation to the struggle for access to housing and a deeper question: where, how and with whom do we want to live? What does it mean to produce a feminist spatiality that not only problematizes the [#quedateencasa](#) ([#stayathome](#)) proposed by the governments, but also proposes the construction of shelters as an alternative to sexist violence? Also this brings up the question of why home is synonymous with the heterosexual nuclear family: it is in this family model that 12 femicides took place in the first 10 days of quarantine. This recognition of the problem of domestic violence is now widespread thanks to a feminist politicization that has highlighted it from the very beginning and that has de-idealized the very notion of domestic space as a safe place.

Florencia: I think there is a discussion that is shared between the struggle for the right to housing and the struggle for women's and LGBTIQ+ rights, and it is linked to questioning the space of the domestic as a private one. Housing is almost automatically associated with the domestic and the domestic is associated with women's responsibilities. It is in this sense that it is mostly women who do the work of administering the home, who make the arrangements with landlords and real estate agents to access a rental, and also who are mainly affected by this 'private' character that access to housing acquires. That is why organizing ourselves as tenants was fundamental to highlight that access to housing is neither free nor private. The real estate market intervenes by imposing conditions of exclusion and deciding who has access to housing and who does not. In addition, it exercises landlord violence under the cover of this privacy. Tenant organizations question that access to housing is a private matter, [instead] we argue that the state must guarantee the right and must regulate the conditions under which access is granted. We also argue that the struggle for housing is necessarily collective.

RHJ: How has this situation changed your activist work and your analyses?

Lucía: This situation has put the agenda of the housing struggle at the center of my feminist activism. In this way, I have tried to interconnect and establish joint agendas between feminist activism and the struggle for access to housing. In turn, it has allowed me to deepen the way in which the confrontation with rent extraction and the struggle for access to land and housing is a strategic point in the agenda of any emancipatory movement.

Florencia: For me, the pandemic was a much better representation of how diverse resistances and struggles with visibly shared objectives are articulated. Those of us who actively participate in feminist, environmental, food sovereignty, land and housing struggles, share the desire to recover sovereignty, the possibility of deciding about our own bodies, our territories, our cities, our ways of life. At the same time and as a counterpoint, it is clear that it is only possible to achieve this sovereignty by discussing this extractivist model on a global scale, where a few decide about the living conditions of the majority.

Verónica: The politicization of domestic space is a historical feminist banner. We have said that value is produced there, that the care that sustains life is time and again made invisible and indispensable, that confinement within four walls is a political order of patriarchal hierarchies. With the pandemic, we have seen and experienced the intensification and acceleration of these processes. From the point of view of activism and analysis, we can point to several issues experienced in a span of a few months: increase in domestic work, the imperative of telework, home schooling, etc. The house-factory, which is what we can call homes today in dialogue with the Italian feminists of the 1970s who spoke of the house for women as an analogy of the factory for men, becomes a precise image of this overlapping on a global scale. Thanks to this, capital minimizes its costs: we, workers, pay the rent and services of 'our' workplace; if we do not 'need' transportation to get to work, our social reproduction also becomes cheaper; while platform deliveries ensure precarious delivery logistics, producing cheap mobility in the midst of the pandemic.

RHJ: Generally speaking: Argentina will have to confront many challenges in the coming years, can you expand on if any of you are hopeful and what you see as possibilities for organizing in the context of Argentine politics and its economy and housing? What might housing justice struggles and organizing look like in a near future?

Lucía: In the near future I intend to interconnect this agenda with the organization of the international feminist strike on 8 March, where the struggle for access to housing has been put at the center (see the document cited before). On the other hand, it is strategic for me to articulate and promote collaborating/organizing among activists who are focused on the confrontation with real estate capital in both rural and urban areas.

Verónica: Yes, as Luci points out, it seems to me that this needs to be a key axis for the feminist strike. [We need to] continue in the feminist strike, what we accomplished in the reproductive strike, in order to make unrecognized labor spatialities visible, and in particular to build on/lay out the broader struggle against the dynamics of financial and real estate extractivism that make urban, rural and existential territories new spoils of war. In this sense, the slogan ‘NiUnaMenosSinVivienda’ is fundamental to organize a series of claims, to make visible the different injustices in access to housing, to denounce tenant indebtedness, real estate speculation in the middle of the crisis, and to make visible those who are in a situation of homelessness, etc.

Florencia: Strengthening collective spaces of organization, establishing territorial links between tenants and networking with organizations linked to the struggle for access to land and housing, among others.

RHJ: Do you think that there is a potential for establishing new international solidarities in this changed situation in our interdependent world?

Lucía: International coordination is something that has started to happen in a very concrete way. For example in Argentina we have been inspired by and have entered into contact and coordination with the Platform Against Evictions (PAH) in Madrid. We have exchanged strategies to resist evictions with them and we have been able to discuss the way in which feminism intersects and redefines the struggles for housing.

Verónica: Yes, the other axis that we have been working on, which is the domestic debt, [which has] now also multiplied in relation to the debt for rents and the debt to avoid evictions, has allowed us to draw maps and connections to its flows at a global level and also to the ways that different forms of resistance are connected in order to confront the debt crisis. In this sense, drawing on the transnational impulse of the feminist movement, we see the possibility of connections between concrete struggles for housing to emerge against the debt crisis and for the redefinition and reclaiming of vital spaces.

Participants

Lucía Cavallero is a researcher and PhD candidate in Social Sciences at the University of Buenos Aires. She holds a degree in Sociology from the University of Buenos Aires and teaches at the Universidad Nacional de Tres de Febrero. She is co-author of the book ‘Una

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Verónica Gago teaches at the Universidad de Buenos Aires, and at the Instituto de Altos Estudios, Universidad Nacional de San Martín, Argentina. She is a Researcher at the National Council of Research (CONICET) and member of the research group GIIF : Grupo de Investigación e Intervención Feminista. Gago is the author of ‘Neoliberalism from Below: Popular Pragmatics and Baroque Economies’ (Duke University Press, 2017), and ‘Feminist International’ (Verso 2020). She is founder of the independent radical collective press Tinta Limón. She is member of the Ni Una Menos feminist collective.

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