

Women's Associations and the Emergence of a Social State: Protection for Mothers and Children in Buenos Aires, 1920–1940

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Abstract. This paper examines the women's association movement in Buenos Aires between 1920 and 1940, and its connection with the emergence of a social state. Subsidised by the state, associations led by upper-class women provided a significant number of social assistance services to mothers, working women and children, and had a notable impact on the design of social policy. While historiography concurs that by 1930 the significance of this charitably oriented women's movement had started to decline, being replaced by public welfare services, this paper seeks to question such a conclusion by analysing three of the most important women's social welfare associations in the period and showing how, having become the maternal face of the state, they retained a central role in the provision of social assistance until well into the 1930s, thus helping to prevent the state from becoming a 'colossal bureaucratic machine'.

Keywords: women's associations, social policy, social assistance, social state, Argentina

In 1933, Argentine Minister of Foreign Affairs and Religion Carlos Saavedra Lamas submitted a draft bill on social assistance and social security based on the findings of the First National Conference on Social Assistance. This bill required the national government to 'organise and co-ordinate private and public action in this field', with the state playing a subsidiary role. To this end the state should 'encourage private action and use its institutions to undertake a mission of cooperation, mostly through subsidies'.¹ It was concern for mothers' and children's protection that marked the emergence of Argentina's

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¹ Juan Carlos Veronelli and Magali Veronelli Correch, *Los orígenes institucionales de la salud pública en la Argentina*, vol. 2 (Buenos Aires: Organización Panamericana de la Salud, 2004), p. 423.

first health care and social welfare laws and programmes, whose implementation, as in other European and Latin American countries, was delegated to private philanthropic associations run by upper-class women working alongside various governmental agencies.² This paper deals with the women's association movement and its connection with social policy between 1920 and 1940 in the city of Buenos Aires.

The development of social policy from the late nineteenth century to the 1940s has been, notes Juan Suriano, a topic in historiography on Argentina over the last two decades, analysed from disparate perspectives.³ The approach centred on the relationship between women and the emergence of social policy has mainly focused, with few exceptions, on the activities of the Sociedad de Beneficencia (Benign Society) and of feminist organisations, and has argued that by the 1930s the significance of the women's movement in the creation and supply of welfare services had started to decline and be replaced by a new institutional structure: social welfare services led by public health professionals (*higienistas*).⁴

This paper seeks to problematise such a conclusion by analysing three of the most relevant associations in the period and their connection with the nascent

² For a comparison, see Seth Koven and Sonya Michel (eds.), *Mothers of a New World: Maternalist Politics and the Origins of Welfare States* (London: Routledge, 1993); Gisela Bock and Pat Thane (eds.), *Maternity and Gender Policies: Women and the Rise of the European Welfare States, 1880s–1950s* (London: Routledge, 1991); Theda Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992); and Linda Gordon (ed.), *Women, the State, and Welfare* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990). For the Latin American case, see Yolanda Eraso (ed.), *Mujeres y asistencia social en Latinoamérica, siglos XIX y XX: Argentina, Colombia, México, Perú y Uruguay* (Córdoba: Alción Editora, 2009).

³ Daniel Lvovich and Juan Suriano, 'Introducción', in Lvovich and Suriano, *Las políticas sociales en perspectiva histórica: Argentina 1850–1952* (Buenos Aires: Prometeo, 2006), pp. 9–23, esp. pp. 12–13.

⁴ For the relationship between charity work and public assistance, see Karen Mead, 'Beneficent Maternalism: Argentine Motherhood in Comparative Perspective, 1880–1920', *Journal of Women's History*, 12: 3 (2000), pp. 120–45; Eduardo Ciafardo, 'Caridad y control social: la Sociedad de Beneficencia en la Ciudad de Buenos Aires, 1880–1930', unpubl. MA diss., FLACSO, 1990; and Héctor Recalde, *Beneficencia, asistencialismo estatal y previsión social*, 2 vols. (Buenos Aires: CEAL, 1991). For the relationship between the feminist movement and the rise of social policies, see Dora Barrancos, 'Socialistas y la suplementación de la escuela pública: la Asociación de Bibliotecas y Recreos Infantiles (1913–1930)', in Graciela Morgade (ed.), *Mujeres en la educación: género y docencia en la Argentina 1870–1930* (Buenos Aires: Miño y Dávila, 1997), pp. 130–50; Marcela Nari, *Políticas de maternidad y maternalismo político: Buenos Aires, 1890–1940* (Buenos Aires: Biblos, 2004); and Asunción Lavrin, *Women, Feminism, and Social Change in Argentina, Chile and Uruguay, 1890–1940* (Lincoln, NE, and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1996). For studies problematising the loss of power by upper-class women in the provision of social assistance in the 1930s, see Donna Guy, *Women Build the Welfare State: Performing Charity and Creating Rights in Argentina, 1880–1955* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2009).

social state.⁵ The *Cantinas Maternales* (Mothers' Canteens), the *Sociedad Damas de Caridad de San Vicente de Paúl* (Society of Ladies of Charity of St Vincent de Paul) and the *Conferencias de Señoras de San Vicente de Paúl* (St Vincent de Paul Ladies' Conferences) were charitable bodies founded by upper-class women of the city of Buenos Aires (*porteño*) elite linked to Catholicism and scarcely examined in historical studies of Argentina. Subsidised by the state, these associations provided a significant number of social assistance services for mothers, women and children and had a powerful impact on the design of social policy. Having become the maternal face of the state, they kept playing a central role in the provision of social assistance until well into the 1930s, thus helping prevent the state from becoming a 'colossal bureaucratic machine'.⁶ This is even more significant when compared with the cases of neighbouring countries in the Southern Cone, as it demonstrates how the relative strength of Argentine matrons in comparison with their Uruguayan and Chilean counterparts slowed down the emergence of a state which was actively involved in the social area.

By first reviewing the interwar social context, this paper analyses the ways in which the state dealt with the problem of helping and protecting mothers and children. It then examines the three women's associations devoted to protecting mothers and assisting minors and women, focusing on these organisations' activities, their forms of social intervention, their changing relationship with the state and the grounds underlying their actions. The associations and the state became involved in a debate about the principles that should guide in private philanthropy, its relationship with public assistance, the role the state should play and the significance of women's associations in social welfare programmes. This debate brought about specific consequences in the emergence and interaction between social assistance and social security systems and among women as social policy agents and targets. The analysis of these associations' history not only highlights the role that some women played in providing social assistance to children and other women, but also provides a new perspective on the birth and development of a social state.

*Interwar Buenos Aires: The Social Question, the Family Question,
and Mother and Child Policies*

The interwar period in Buenos Aires was a time of huge social, political, economic and cultural change. Rapid urbanisation, the advent of mass politics

⁵ I use the term 'social state' in order not to allude to specific models such as the welfare state. For a discussion about the term in the Argentine case, see Juan Suriano, 'Los historiadores y el proceso de construcción del estado social', in Julián Bertranou, Juan Manuel Palacio and Gerardo Serrano (eds.), *En el país del no me acuerdo: desmemoria institucional e historia de la política social en la Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Prometeo, 2004), pp. 33–58.

⁶ See note 65.

and resulting political polarisation, and the impact of the 1929 crash all called into question older certainties. The capital city grew very rapidly, reaching a population of 2.3 million inhabitants by 1930.⁷ This accelerated growth unleashed an inexorable transformation in the city's appearance. Certain urban sectors were labelled as in need of special protection – these included women, particularly female heads of households and workers, who were viewed as mothers or potential mothers whose maternal role could be harmed by work. Another category was that of 'abandoned' children, living in *conventillos* (overcrowded tenement houses) and roaming the streets, with or without parents.

The new concern for these social groups derived partly from what was deemed a birth-rate crisis. As Marcela Nari notes, if between 1890 and 1920 one of the main anxieties about the future of the nation was the high child mortality rate, from 1920 to 1940 such concern was partially replaced by a worry about falling birth rates.⁸ Women's participation in the labour force, which had been regarded as a social problem since the late nineteenth century, then gained special relevance. As recent studies have shown, between 1914 and 1940 there was a decrease in the proportion of women working in domestic service and an increase in the rate of those engaged in manufacturing, such as in the textile, chemical and food industries. Women's presence was also important in the service sector, particularly in administration, communications and education.⁹

The lower fertility rate and the decreasing immigration flows following the First World War and the 1929 crash, together with women's growing participation in the labour market and what was considered the consequently higher number of neglected or delinquent children,¹⁰ fuelled an apocalyptic

⁷ Noemí Girbal-Blacha, 'El estado neoconservador, el intervencionismo económico y la sociedad de los años treinta', in Girbal-Blacha (ed.), *Estado, sociedad y economía en la Argentina (1930–1997)* (Buenos Aires: Universidad Nacional del Litoral, 2001), pp. 52–3.

⁸ The stillbirth rate in the city of Buenos Aires was 4.49 per 1,000 births in 1910; it dropped to 3.93 by 1920 and to 3.84 by 1930. In 1914 the gross birth rate in Buenos Aires was 34 per 1,000 inhabitants but it dropped to 24 by 1920, to 21 by 1930, and to 17, the lowest figure in the period, by 1937. In turn, the average number of children per woman in the city fell from 3.38 in 1914 to 1.34 in 1936. See Victoria Mazzeo (ed.), 'Situación demográfica de la Capital Federal', *Serie Análisis Demográfico*, 10 (Buenos Aires: INDEC, 1997), p. 12; and Nari, *Políticas de maternidad*, pp. 27–30, 277–8, 284.

⁹ By 1947, female labour accounted for 28 per cent of the economically active population in Buenos Aires, rising from 24.5 per cent in 1914. Within the manufacturing sector, women accounted for 33 per cent of the workforce. The percentage of working families made up of a woman on her own or with her children was only 8 per cent in 1914 but had risen to 17 per cent in 1928. See Nari, *Políticas de maternidad*, pp. 79–81, 291–4.

¹⁰ The law reflected concern about children living or working on the streets, who were 'physically or morally abandoned' or in 'moral danger' and might get into trouble with the law, and it provided for specific confinement places for minors charged with offences, and for probation, with under-18-year-olds exempted from remand in custody. See 'Pro Infancia

view among economists, physicians and politicians about the future of the Argentine 'race' and, hence, of the nation. Stress was thus laid on the family/fatherland bond, and especially on women's reproductive role, as one of the solutions to the problem of the nation's future. Under both the Radical governments and the conservative regime of the 1930s, different social reformist sectors (liberals, Catholics and Socialists) called for greater state intervention in the so-called 'family question', often based on a common public-health and eugenicist view of the roots of the country's problems. Such a view sought to improve the 'genetic stock' of the population through social reform, specifically through programmes combining health care with social assistance, and to fashion a healthy and vigorous population as the core of the fatherland. This found practical application through policies that would support the 'traditional' family and thereby prevent problems such as unmarried couples, infanticide, illegitimacy and neglected or offending children.¹¹

During this period, several social reforms addressed the family question. Health care institutions expanded, providing assistance to children and instruction to mothers concerning hygiene and nutrition, particularly through house calls by 'home visitors', a practice that gained momentum in the late 1930s.¹² As regards social legislation, two laws are significant here. First, law No. 10,903, better known as the Agote Law, was enacted in 1919, with the crucial support by the then president of the republic, Hipólito Yrigoyen. It gave the state, under certain circumstances, the power to remove parental authority and to exercise guardianship of minors considered 'abandoned and delinquent'. These minors were held at the Patronato Nacional de Menores (National Board for the Care of Minors), a public entity reorganised by decree in 1931. Given the constant shortage of places to accommodate them, many of these minors ended up being sent to private associations, which made it difficult to keep a record of the official number of delinquent, abandoned or

desvalida: encuesta de la Comisión de Estudios Pro Infancia Desvalida', *Boletín del Museo Social Argentino*, 17: 88 (1929), pp. 487–91.

¹¹ Nari, *Políticas de maternidad*, pp. 28–30; Mirta Zaida Lobato, 'El estado en los años treinta y el avance desigual de los derechos y la ciudadanía', *Estudios Sociales*, 7: 12 (1997), pp. 46–9; Diego Armus and Susana Belmartino, 'Enfermedades, médicos y cultura higiénica', in Alejandro Cattaruzza (eds.), *Nueva historia Argentina: crisis económica, avance del estado e incertidumbre política (1930–1943)*, vol. 7 (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 2001), pp. 320–7; María Silvia Di Liscia, 'Hijos sanos y legítimos: sobre matrimonio y asistencia social en Argentina (1935–1948)', *História, Ciências, Saúde – Manguinhos*, 9 (2002), pp. 222–5.

¹² The Protección a la Primera Infancia agency of the city of Buenos Aires assisted 22,369 under-two-year-olds in 1929 through its infant dispensaries and childcare institutes; in 1920 this figure was much lower (11,415). See Mazzeo, *Mortalidad infantil*, p. 71; and Diego Armus, *La ciudad impura: salud, tuberculosis y cultura en la ciudad de Buenos Aires, 1870–1950* (Buenos Aires: Edhasa, 2007), p. 85.

simply poor minors in Buenos Aires.¹³ Second, in 1933 paid maternity leave for working women was approved, consisting of mandatory contributions by female workers, employers and the state. This was one of the few social laws approved during this period which dovetailed with the notion of social security.¹⁴

It was public health workers who pressed the hardest to extend state health care and social assistance to women and children in need and to organise a centralised mother and child protection system. As Susana Belmartino notes, by the early 1930s the public health school of thought advocated greater state intervention in the organisation of health care and welfare services, bringing order to the decentralised system of the period, where public institutions, usually led by doctors and dependent on ministries and levels of government, co-existed with private associations that were heavily financed by the state through subsidies. The idea was taking hold that social assistance was a duty of the modern state and, hence, a right of the assisted individual.¹⁵ This in turn meant a rationalisation of subsidies to private social assistance associations and the subordination of private associations to health care guidelines drawn up by public agencies.¹⁶ The 1929 crash and its social consequences played an important role in this change, partly explaining the burgeoning number of bills on social policy backed by a new parliamentary consensus thanks mainly to political support from conservative forces. This represented a remarkable shift when compared with the long period of legislative paralysis that dominated the years from 1916 to 1930.¹⁷

This move to centralise welfare provision was played out in a number of bills, some of which passed into law. The most important of these was the law governing the creation in 1936 of the Dirección Nacional de Maternidad e Infancia (National Bureau for Maternity and Childhood, DNMI). One of the DNMI's purposes was to supervise public and private entities devoted to mothers and children – except for those dependent on the Sociedad de Beneficencia – and to create state institutions for protecting mothers and children. It achieved little during this period, however, mostly due to its

¹³ Precisely as a result of such lack of knowledge, in 1933 the first census was undertaken of orphaned, abandoned and delinquent minors in the city of Buenos Aires, which yielded the figure of 10,740 minors (5,172 girls and 5,568 boys). 'Nota explicativa sobre la finalidad del censo verificado por el Patronato Nacional de Menores', *Infancia y Juventud*, 5 (1937), pp. 69–70. ¹⁴ Lobato, 'El estado en los años treinta', pp. 49–52.

¹⁵ Susana Belmartino, *La atención médica argentina en el siglo XX: instituciones y procesos* (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 2005), pp. 70–108.

¹⁶ Recalde, *Beneficencia, asistencialismo estatal*, vol. 1, pp. 85–101.

¹⁷ This legislative paralysis, which resulted in most proposed legislation never being approved, was due to the social agitation and ideological conflict taking place in this period. See Tulio Halperín Donghi, *Vida y muerte de la república verdadera* (Buenos Aires: Ariel, 1999), pp. 153–64.

limited budget and the jurisdictional overlaps among different institutions and government levels.¹⁸ As Asunción Lavrin argues, these types of endeavours were marked by the sluggishness of the state bureaucratic structure and by the heavy costs imposed by the bureaucratic machinery to put them into practice.¹⁹

Alongside these demands and the enactment of some of them, the state launched a subsidy rationalisation policy. Key measures included the 1937 decree establishing the Registro Nacional de Asistencia Social (National Registry of Social Assistance), under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Religion. Any social assistance undertaking had to be logged in this registry, the responsibilities of which included (besides record-keeping) involvement in the granting of subsidies and coordination of welfare services, both private and public. Failure to register prevented a charity from receiving public subsidies and would result in the automatic loss of legal status.²⁰ Such measures sought to put an end, at least from a legislative perspective, to higienistas' ongoing criticism of the chaotic manner in which the state funded private associations. There were no clear criteria for the award of public subsidies, which were granted more on the basis of connections between association managers and public officials than that of the efficiency of the services delivered by such associations.

The subsidy rationalisation policy was accompanied by an increase in state subsidies to private associations, particularly in the 1930s. In 1940, Luis Siri, assistant director of the DNMI, studied the trend of the national government's allocation for social welfare, showing that these funds amounted to 2.5 per cent of the overall national budget in 1910–20, 2.74 per cent in 1920–30 and 3.22 per cent in 1930–40. This latter figure equalled m\$*n* 28 million, a clear leap in the amount of money that the state invested in social assistance, most of it allocated to private institutions.²¹

¹⁸ Carolina Biernat and Karina Ramacciotti, 'La tutela estatal de la madre y el niño en la Argentina: estructuras administrativas, legislación y cuadros técnicos (1936–1955)', *História, Ciências, Saúde – Manguinhos*, 15: 2 (2008), pp. 331–51.

¹⁹ Lavrin, *Women, Feminism, and Social Change*, p. 113.

²⁰ Emilio Tenti Fanfani, *Estado y pobreza: estrategias típicas de intervención*, vol. 1 (Buenos Aires: CEAL, 1989), pp. 68, 72–4.

²¹ The abbreviation m\$*n* refers to *pesos moneda nacional*, the Argentine currency during this period. See Luis Siri, 'Bases para la elaboración del plan general de protección a la infancia en la República Argentina', in *Actos y trabajos del Primer Congreso Nacional de Puericultura*, vol. 2 (Buenos Aires: Alfredo Frascoli, 1940), p. 208. Donna Guy notes that an analysis of the reports on the national budget by the Chamber of Deputies confirms the rise in funds allocated to social assistance, although, as she points out, it is impossible to keep a systematic record of the percentage of the budget applied to subsidies given the lack of any classification of the official information delivered. See Guy, *Women Build the Welfare State*, pp. 55–6, 133–4.

To sum up, during the interwar period the state passed social laws to protect working mothers and neglected children, and reorganised its health care services aimed at protecting mothers and children. In an attempt to make these services more efficient, it tried to centralise and rationalise them, either through more effective co-ordination of private and public social assistance services under a single agency, or through more effective control of the subsidies given to private entities. The 1930s also saw a rise in subsidies to private associations engaged in social assistance. What role did upper-class ladies play in this process?

*Matrons and Private Philanthropy: Social Assistance to Mothers,
Children and Women*

In the context described above, many women's associations, alarmed by the increase in the number of children living in a state of destitution and the number of working mothers and working women, founded homes and boarding schools to protect and assist these women and children. The women who organised these associations belonged to the porteño elite, were strongly identified with Catholicism and were the wives, daughters or sisters of major city politicians. For instance, Silvia Saavedra Lamas de Pueyrredón, the manager of the *Cantinas Maternales*, was the sister of Carlos Alberto Saavedra Lamas, a congressman, minister of justice and public education (1915) and minister of foreign affairs and religion (1932–8). Not only were these women related to the upper echelons of the porteño political scene, but they had also woven a dense network of connections among the various women's associations. For example, Dolores Anchorena de Elortondo, the president of the *Conferencias de San Vicente de Paúl*, was simultaneously a member of the executive board of the *Sociedad de Beneficencia*, a member of the high council of the *Liga Argentina de Mujeres Católicas* (Catholic Women's League of Argentina) and a member of the *Cooperadoras Salesianas* (Salesian Cooperators).²² These relationships show the power wielded by the city's upper-class women in the cause of philanthropy.

Among the many women's associations, this paper focuses on the three most important ones in their respective fields. The first, the *Cantinas Maternales*, tackled the health and welfare of mothers; the second, the *Sociedad Damas de Caridad de San Vicente de Paúl*, was devoted to protecting children; and the third, the *Conferencias de Señoras de San Vicente de Paúl*, was engaged in helping and protecting women. These three associations, besides dealing with the most pressing problems of the time by leading

²² Adelia di Carlo, 'Mujeres de actuación destacada: Doña Dolores de Anchorena de Elortondo', *Caras y Caretas*, 1800: 1 (1933), p. 95.

programmes with high numbers of beneficiaries, were among those that received the largest government subsidies.²³

The Cantinas Maternales association and the issue of destitute mothers

The Cantinas Maternales, founded in 1915 by Julia Acevedo de Martínez de Hoz, were created as free soup kitchens 'for any mother raising her child' and also provided health care to children and practical childcare lessons to mothers. According to its articles, the association sought to 'promote a healthy population, preventing diseases among mothers and their newborns through healthy food. It also has the goal of ensuring and encouraging breastfeeding, as an imperative of nature and in the interest of mothers, children and the social order.'²⁴

In 1916, a year after the foundation of the Cantinas Maternales, there were four canteens operating in the city of Buenos Aires. These served 'mothers in need, regardless of marital status, on the sole condition that they breastfeed their children'.²⁵ In addition, that year one of the canteens began a home care service providing medical assistance for childbirth to those women attending the canteen. Over time, home care extended to all those mothers requesting the service. Besides health care, medicines, cradles and baby clothes were also handed out. In the 1920s, the Cantinas Maternales added school canteens to their premises, particularly attended by beneficiary mothers' school-age children, who were given lunch and afternoon tea.²⁶ By 1929 two more mothers' canteens had been opened, totalling six establishments, plus the four school canteens. During the 1930s two more mothers' canteens were added, reaching a total of eight in Buenos Aires.²⁷ The relationship between the Cantinas association and the state health care bureaucracy was complex.

²³ The Conferencias de Señoras de San Vicente de Paúl, followed by the Damas de Caridad and, from the 1930s onwards, by the Cantinas Maternales, were recorded as receiving the highest subsidies in the list of state-funded associations in the session journal of the Chamber of Deputies.

²⁴ Emilio Coni, *Higiene social, asistencia y previsión social: Buenos Aires caritativo y previsor* (Buenos Aires: Emilio Spinelli, 1918), pp. 251–2.

²⁵ 'Asociación Cantinas Maternales', *El derecho a la vida* (Buenos Aires, 1922), p. 5.

²⁶ 'La Asociación Cantinas Maternales de Buenos Aires: orígenes y desenvolvimiento de esta institución que, en la Capital Federal, se preocupa de la madre y el niño', *Boletín del Museo Social Argentino*, 18: 91 (1930), p. 30.

²⁷ By 1923, the four existing canteens had given out 87,299 meals and assisted 1,447 children. The home care service helped 192 mothers. See 'Nuestras instituciones sociales: la obra de las cantinas maternales', *Boletín del Museo Social Argentino*, 12: 23 (1923), p. 77. In 1929 a total of 99,200 meals were given out and 3,644 children were assisted. In 1934, 371,403 meals were distributed and 6,767 mothers received medical care. See Oscar Rodríguez, *La protección social del recién nacido: bases para una legislación en la República Argentina* (Córdoba: Aniceto López, 1936), pp. 115–20.

On the one hand, there were attempts at cooperation between both sides, particularly in the area of mothers' and children's nutrition. In 1922, the *Protección a la Primera Infancia* (Early Childhood Protection) agency of *Asistencia Pública* (the national public welfare body) seemed to reach an agreement with the *Cantinas* association to implement the canteen system at the 23 childcare establishments under the aegis of *Asistencia Pública*, starting with two municipal premises located in the Belgrano and La Boca neighbourhoods.²⁸ For unknown reasons, this project was never put into practice. Some years later, in 1928, the National Education Board asked the *Cantinas* association president to found and manage another six soup kitchens like those that operated in the mothers' canteens, but under the aegis of the Board in this case. These worked for one year under the direction of Mrs Martínez de Hoz, who had to resign from her leading position due to her multiple tasks at the association.²⁹

However, if the welfare side of the *Cantinas* association enjoyed a good reputation in the eyes of the state health care lobby, the same could not be said of the provision of health care services. In 1933, León Velasco Blanco, who formed part of the social service panel of the First National Conference on Social Assistance, sponsored by Argentine President Agustín P. Justo, pointed out that the canteens, despite their excellent work,

have invaded other fields of action of social medicine, such as care of sick children and childbirth assistance. This has been detrimental to their true and mandatory activities, perhaps because of the lack of cooperation with those institutions in charge of such social medicine duties ... [This] forces the institution to divert funds that it could use in order to fulfil its only goal – feeding a child-rearing mother.³⁰

It followed that the health care role should be played by *Asistencia Pública*. This view was shared by other medical professionals, such as Alberto Peralta Ramos, the director of the *Instituto de Maternidad* (Maternity Institute), who in 1928 said, 'I believe that the *Cantinas Maternales* should in the future, while maintaining their complete autonomy, coordinate their action and work jointly with the technical services of maternity wards to mutually complement their action.'³¹ The same physicians who criticised certain actions by the association also recognised that many of the social services had originally been devised by the ladies and only later adopted by state institutions. Alberto Peralta Ramos himself argued that 'the home care

²⁸ 'Asistencia a los lactantes y a las madres', *Boletín del Museo Social Argentino*, 11: 18 (1922), pp. 101–2.

²⁹ 'La Asociación Cantinas Maternales', pp. 29–31.

³⁰ León Velasco Blanco, 'Acción de las cantinas maternales como medio de estimular la alimentación natural del lactante', *Primera conferencia nacional de asistencia social: trabajos presentados*, vol. 3 (Buenos Aires: Enrique Frigerio e Hijo, 1934), pp. 36–7.

³¹ Alberto Peralta Ramos, *Protección a la madre desamparada* (Buenos Aires: Telleres, 1928), p. 15.

service was first implemented in Buenos Aires ... by the institution *Cantinas Maternales* ... *Asistencia Pública* in the capital city has subsequently put into practice over the last few years this home care arrangement that we currently have.³² For doctors the time had come for those tasks specifically related to medical work to become the state's responsibility.

The complex relationship with the state health care system was associated with the financing of the *Cantinas Maternales* and the multiple activities they performed. The association was financed mostly from private sources and to a lesser extent by state contributions, subsidies which nonetheless increased significantly in the 1930s, alongside the association's growth.³³

In spite of this increase, some public health officials and legislators as well as matrons complained about the scant importance assigned by the state to the welfare activities of the *Cantinas* association. In 1933 León Velasco Blanco argued that 'the tiny number of canteens currently operating across such a big city and after nearly 20 years of existence clearly shows that the [government] authorities have been indifferent to their actions and have left their maintenance to private charity'.³⁴ At the same time, the association authorities themselves declared in 1923 that 'there is still a great deal to be done; we will not help the large population in Buenos Aires with only four canteens, but if this institution realised its ideal, of being ... adopted by the public authorities, because of its social welfare work, its efficacy would be greater and its action more extensive'.³⁵ In fact, in 1927 congressman Juan B. Castro, working jointly with the *Cantinas* association, submitted a bill proposing to extend the reach of the association throughout both the city of Buenos Aires and the whole national territory through a pro rata increase in government subsidies, to be managed by the ladies, with the association thereby maintaining its autonomy.³⁶

The will to extend the services administered by the *Cantinas Maternales* thus stemmed both from doctors at *Asistencia Pública* and from the association's female managers. Some doctors felt that this should be done by rationalising the association's activities, giving higher subsidies for the welfare side but transferring the health care aspect to state entities. The ladies, however, wanted the government to give them greater subsidies, even suggesting

³² *Ibid.*

³³ There is a lack of systematic information on the income and subsidies for the association. The data available show that the subsidies given by the national government in 1920 were m\$N 3,000; in the 1930s, the subsidy to the *Cantinas Maternales* climbed sharply, reaching m\$N 90,000 by 1934 and m\$N 100,000 by 1936. See Congreso Nacional, 'Anexo M: subsidios y beneficencia', *Diario de Sesiones de la Cámara de Diputados*, 2 (1920), p. 801, and 8 (1934), p. 280; and Rodríguez, *La protección social del recién nacido*, p. 115.

³⁴ Velasco Blanco, 'Acción de las cantinas maternales', p. 37.

³⁵ 'Nuestras instituciones sociales', p. 78.

³⁶ Congreso Nacional, *Diario de Sesiones de la Cámara de Diputados*, 4 (1927), pp. 470–5.

that the state should adopt the system of the association's own institutions but leave management of the same in the hands of the association. In fact, the state significantly increased its subsidies to the *Cantinas Maternales* during the 1930s, thus recognising the relevance of its social work. Nevertheless, as shown in the first section of this paper, the state was also interested in becoming directly involved in this area, and it was the DNMI that took charge of the setting up of mothers' canteens, a task that was only partially accomplished in this period due to the meagre budget allocated to this government agency.³⁷ Rather than mothers' canteens, it was children's soup kitchens that were started up through *Asistencia Pública* in the city of Buenos Aires, and the National Education Board.³⁸

The Sociedad Damas de Caridad de San Vicente de Paúl and the issue of defenceless children

The *Sociedad Damas de Caridad de San Vicente de Paúl*, or the *Damas de Caridad*, as it was most commonly called, stood out as one of the first and few associations providing both support to 'defenceless' children without separating them from their parents, thus preventing abandonment of children, and lodging to abandoned or delinquent girls sent by various government agencies.

Maternal homes, the *Damas de Caridad's* major area of activity, had the purpose of giving shelter to children deprived of family support. By 1918 the organisation had five homes managed by the sisters of St Vincent de Paul. Such mothering homes fed and educated pre-school and school-age children whose parents and especially mothers worked outside home. In the words of the institution's president, parents were offered 'a stay in a safe place, education and food for their children, leaving them the freedom to devote themselves to their daily chores and the chance to meet their children at home in the evening'.³⁹ Underage orphaned girls were also admitted, particularly those sent by the *Patronato Nacional de Menores*; these were girls over ten years old who would remain at the association until they were 22. The girls could join the ironing and sewing workshops set up at the homes. Until 1928

³⁷ Siri, 'Bases para la elaboración del plan general', p. 212; 'La infancia y sus problemas: creación de la Dirección de Maternidad e Infancia', *Boletín del Museo Social Argentino*, 25: 181–2 (1937), p. 151.

³⁸ For the creation of school canteens in the city of Buenos Aires, see 'Comedores infantiles', *Boletín de la Unión Panamericana*, 1 (1925), p. 315; and Amelia Bregante, 'Asistencia social al niño débil en edad escolar', *Boletín del Museo Social Argentino*, 25: 175–6 (1937), pp. 18–25.

³⁹ *Sociedad Damas de Caridad de San Vicente de Paúl* (hereafter *Damas de Caridad*), *Informe de la sociedad año 1920* (Buenos Aires, 1921), p. 5; and *Su obra de cincuenta años 1866–1916: publicación conmemorativa* (Buenos Aires: Tragant, 1916), p. 77.

they were distributed among the five homes; later they were congregated at Asilo San José, which had a capacity of approximately 120 minors.⁴⁰

The 1920s saw strong growth in the Damas de Caridad. There was an increase not in the number of homes but in the number of assisted people. After the 1930s, the figures for both started to drop slightly.⁴¹ One plausible reason for the lower number of underage inmates could have been the rising competition from state-owned kindergartens and institutions under the aegis of the Patronato Nacional de Menores, which expanded during this period.⁴²

The Damas de Caridad's funds, which came from both private contributions and state subsidies, reflect these shifts. Subsidies did not vary much during this period, with the association receiving an annual average of m\$N 108,000 for the 1920s, while in the 1930s the annual average was m\$N 96,000. As regards private contributions, there is no information available for much of the period, although they seem to have declined in the 1930s.

In fact, annual reports reveal the association's growing concern for generating its own resources to deal with its financial difficulties. In 1933, the president declared: 'We believe the time has come to strengthen the work at our homes' workshops and to extend our social assistance endeavours, for the purpose of obtaining larger revenues which, by offsetting the decline in state support, could bring us gradually closer to our aim of having our homes supported by their own resources some day.'⁴³ On the other hand, the annual reports also record requests for subsidy increases, which became recurrent throughout this period and rose after the crash of 1929 and the subsequent overall decrease in subsidies. These requests required a direct petition to members of the executive branch of government, particularly to the minister of foreign affairs and religion or to the president of the Budget Commission of the House of Representatives, so that they might arrange for an increase.⁴⁴

Alongside these requests, the state started controlling the association's activities and resources, especially in the 1930s. By way of example, in 1937 the association's reports showed that the budget law authorised the executive branch 'to suspend the subsidies voted through by the Argentine Congress for

⁴⁰ Damas de Caridad, *Actas 1928-1932*, p. 65. These records are held in the association's private archives.

⁴¹ Due to the lack of information for most of the period, only the available data are shown, which nonetheless signal a downward trend. In 1918 the association helped between 3,000 and 3,200 minors: see Coni, *Higiene social, asistencia y previsión social*, pp. 117-23. In 1924 it reached 4,000 children. After 1928 the figures start declining, falling to 2,572 children assisted in 1936. Damas de Caridad, *Actas 1923-1928*, pp. 111-15; and *Actas 1933-1938*, p. 265.

⁴² See Barrancos, 'Socialistas y la suplementación de la escuela pública', p. 147.

⁴³ Damas de Caridad, *Actas 1933-1938*, p. 30.

⁴⁴ Damas de Caridad, *Actas 1923-1928*, pp. 61, 111-15; *Actas 1928-1932*, p. 55; and *Actas 1933-1938*, pp. 127, 187, 218-19, 251-2.

Table 1. *Sociedad Damas de Caridad de San Vicente de Paúl: Private Income and State Subsidies (m\$n)*

Year	Subsidies	Private income
1920	64,000	270,000
1921	74,000	—
1922	90,000	—
1923	100,000	—
1924	87,300	—
1925	—	—
1926	—	—
1927	140,000	—
1928	140,000	—
1929	140,000	—
1930	140,000	—
1931	105,000	—
1932	88,000	—
1933	88,500	200,700
1934	88,000	—
1935	—	—
1936	100,000	184,000
1937	100,000	182,000
1938	100,000	226,000
1939	—	—
1940	—	—

Sources: Damas de Caridad, *Actas*, 1920–40; Congreso Nacional, ‘Presupuesto anual del Diario de Sesiones’, *Diario de Sesiones de la Cámara de Diputados*, 2 (1920), p. 800, 8 (1934), pp. 276–84, and 2 (1937), pp. 114–21; ‘Primer Censo de Instituciones Oficiales y Privadas Protectoras de la Infancia Abandonada y Delincuente’, *Infancia y Juventud*, 5 (1937), pp. 69–70. Author’s own compilation.

institutions that do not supply free assistance to individuals, and also for any subsidised entity that fails to place a visible sign stating “Subsidised by the National Government”.’ The president of the Damas de Caridad decided not to place such a sign for the time being, claiming that the subsidy received from the government was very far from covering the association’s expenses.⁴⁵ The Damas de Caridad perceived such requirements as government meddling in issues whose management ultimately concerned only the association, as it was only partially subsidised by the government.

Apart from these attempts to control the association’s activities, the relationship between the government and the Damas de Caridad was quite harmonious. There was an interesting change in the role played by the Damas de Caridad, who gradually became providers of social welfare services for the government, receiving money for each minor admitted by the association under the Agote Law. On the association’s balance sheets there were state

⁴⁵ Damas de Caridad, *Actas 1933–1938*, pp. 251–52.

contributions which, unlike subsidies – that is, long- and indefinite-term state transfers – were given in consideration of the services provided by the association. In fact, back in 1920 the association had agreed to house delinquent or abandoned minors, particularly girls, given the special lack of state institutions for them, making it the first private entity to offer this service.⁴⁶ That year the government offered the association 30 bursaries of m\$25 a month from the funds that the National Congress had approved for this purpose. In turn, two members of the association were appointed honorary inspectors to monitor some minors set free and left to the care of their own families. During their inspections they seized the opportunity to ‘improve the morals’ of one of the households, making the minor’s parents as well as one of her sisters get married.⁴⁷ After 1931, when the Patronato Nacional de Menores was reorganised, the association started to receive an increasing number of minors and more money for its services. In 1931 maternal home no. 5 housed ‘50 orphaned girls sent by the Patronato Nacional de Menores, with which an agreement has been entered into’.⁴⁸ In 1936 the Patronato Nacional de Menores accepted the Damas de Caridad’s request to extend the agreement with the institution, increasing the number of scholarships from 80 to 100 for a ten-year period.⁴⁹

In fact, various social and governmental players sought advice from the Damas de Caridad on how to deal with the problem of vulnerable and needy children. In 1933, upon the organisation of the First National Conference on Abandoned and Delinquent Children under the auspices and with the attendance of Argentine President Agustín P. Justo and his cabinet, with Jorge Coll (who was the head of the Patronato Nacional de Menores and later minister of public instruction, and the husband of María Martel de Coll, a managing member of the association) as president, the Damas de Caridad were invited to discuss the topic. They sent María Martel de Coll as their representative, who focused on the problem of minors’ reintegration into society after staying at the homes.⁵⁰

The Damas de Caridad even consented to the centralisation of the system of social assistance – one of the major subjects of debate and demands by the

⁴⁶ Patronato Nacional de Menores, *Primera conferencia nacional sobre infancia abandonada y delincuente* (Buenos Aires: Colonia Hogar Ricardo Gutiérrez, 1933), p. 140.

⁴⁷ Damas de Caridad, *Informe de la Sociedad*, pp. 6–7.

⁴⁸ Damas de Caridad, *Su obra de noventa años, 1866–1956: publicación conmemorativa* (Buenos Aires: Gaspar y Octorino, 1956), p. 6.

⁴⁹ Damas de Caridad, *Actas 1933–1938*, pp. 2, 265. To these agreements one should add court subsidies, health care subsidies from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Religion, and grants by the Ministry of Justice and Public Education as the number of minors admitted grew larger. All these funds were recorded as private income for the association.

⁵⁰ Damas de Caridad, *Actas 1933–1938*, p. 24; Patronato Nacional de Menores, *Primera conferencia sobre infancia abandonada y delincuente*, pp. 139–41.

state health care lobby – for instance through their participation in the creation of a ‘general file of individuals dependent on the Nation’s social work’, always labelling any petitions in this sense as highly commendable.⁵¹ In 1933, following the Conference on Abandoned and Delinquent Children, the Patronato Nacional de Menores, following a request by the executive branch, undertook the First Census of Public and Private Entities Protecting Abandoned and Delinquent Children, which published the data provided by, among others, the Damas de Caridad, on the kind of public and private resources they obtained, the number of people assisted and the institution’s expenses.⁵² This cooperation between the government and the Damas de Caridad is even more remarkable if one takes into account that the Sociedad de Beneficencia refused to deliver such data.

In fact, the crucial assistance given by private associations in implementing Law No. 10,903 was recognised by a number of specialists in child welfare. José Paz Anchorena, a legal specialist in the subject and a member of the Patronato de la Infancia, pointed out in 1931 the significance of private associations, arguing that ‘with their establishments, they contribute to the achievement of the goals sought by the law, because if purely official action had been taken into account, the law would have failed’.⁵³ He added that it was necessary to centralise public and private institutions into a single agency in order to render legislation effective. Both public and private institutions were useful and had to cooperate. In the division of tasks,

public entities mainly have inflexibility, severity, so they are highly useful as day camps for rebellious minors, who need almost military discipline. We will leave the private entities, less costly and less rigid in this sense, for those abandoned minors who are simply undisciplined. In this sense, both are necessary because in some cases it is pointless to make the state bear the cost of a minor who can be perfectly well accommodated in a private institute.⁵⁴

Clearly, the Damas de Caridad took advantage of the institutional void that emerged after the enactment of the Agote Law, particularly as regards female minors, thereby expanding the organisation’s activity and working in parallel, although in close association, with the state. Accordingly, in view of the state’s need for places to house these minors, the association became the practical counterpart of social legislation concerning children, with the consequent saving of the costs involved in maintaining this kind of institution.

⁵¹ Damas de Caridad, *Actas 1928–1932*, p. 255.

⁵² Damas de Caridad, *Actas 1933–1938*, p. 3; ‘Nota explicativa sobre la finalidad del censo’, pp. 64–71.

⁵³ José Paz Anchorena, ‘Las instituciones oficiales y privadas en la prevención y protección de la infancia desvalida y delincuente’, *Boletín del Museo Social Argentino*, 19: 112–14 (1931), p. 449.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 453.

As to the view of the Damas de Caridad on their social programmes, they saw themselves as performing both a material and, perhaps more importantly, a moral task. In 1924, the president of the association said that social undertakings 'in their double material and moral aspect manage to cover a large part of the wide range of human support that the state leaves to private endeavour, even though it had previously stimulated it with its own resources. They correspond completely to the lofty Christian aims that inspire them.'⁵⁵

One moral activity par excellence was the attempt to reconstitute families based on an ideal model of the nuclear family, performing marriages, baptisms and communions. The maternal homes were strongly oriented towards prevention. From the Damas de Caridad's perspective, the homes delivered a unique benefit: they ensured that families stayed together, preventing the consequences that children would have suffered in case of family separation or absence. According to the president of the association, 'there are poor families and there are mothers who are forced to earn their children's bread, and lacking enough time, they are forced to neglect them ... It is to make up for this lack of early education by families that the homes have been founded.'⁵⁶ Whenever the situation so required, the Damas de Caridad also housed in their institutions abandoned and delinquent children, adding their efforts to those being made by the state in this field.

It was precisely in this moral mission that the association's ladies found the most significant rationale for their work. The moral space that the state accorded the Damas de Caridad was, according to their president, the ideal space in which they could realise their vision. Here lies the division of tasks shared by the ladies and the state. In their capacity as the nation's moral guarantors, the ladies had to work separately from the state, but with the same goal – that of achieving social peace and order.

The Conferencias de Señoras de San Vicente de Paúl and the protection of women

The social work carried out by the Conferencias de Señoras de San Vicente de Paúl, known as the Damas Vicentinas, was very wide-ranging, including both house calls, when they would take food and clothing vouchers and hand out Catholic literature to working families, and large-scale endeavours devoted to social welfare, a task at which they excelled and for which they received large sums of money both from the state and from individuals. Some enterprises are worth mentioning in this regard, such as the Casa de Santa Felicitas (1905); Colonia Obrera (1910), which provided low-rent houses in Nueva Pompeya for working families; the Asilos para Viudas (Widows' Home), set up in 1909;

⁵⁵ Damas de Caridad, *Actas 1922–1928*, p. 112.

⁵⁶ Damas de Caridad, *Su obra de cincuenta años*, p. 68.

the Instituto Profesional de Economía Doméstica (Professional Institute of Domestic Economy), also established in 1909, which taught first aid, cooking and hygiene; and the Asilo Nocturno de Mujeres (Women's Night Shelter), set up in 1918 for poor women with children. All these institutions were managed and financed by the General Council.⁵⁷

The leaders of the Damas Vicentinas saw their social undertakings in the following terms, as rendering various social services to the 'needy classes':

At Colonia Obrera they provide a home, at the Asilo in Villa Devoto they educate their daughters from the most tender age, at Santa Felicitas they complete this education from an occupational point of view and they offer a hospitable family environment to the young women ... that lack it, through the workers' kitchens they provide healthy nutrition and at a really low price ... to industrial neighbourhood workers.⁵⁸

This shows the preventive understanding that the Damas Vicentinas had of social welfare, viewed as material and moral support for the poorest classes and especially women. The association's moralising action is clearly demonstrated through the operation of the Casa de Santa Felicitas, which due to its size also gives an idea of the association's work. This institution's goal was to build 'a home for young working women to supplement the enterprise in Villa Devoto, providing a job and home to women from early on when they start out on life's struggle'.⁵⁹ At the home there were large-scale laundry and ironing workshops where women worked to be able to afford some of their living expenses. The rest of the salary was saved, so that workers could accumulate a small amount of capital and in the process become familiar with the habit of budgeting and saving. In turn, there was also teaching, mostly in areas related to domestic life. The steam from the modern electric laundry where many of these women worked was even used to help prepare meals for the workers' soup kitchen. Alongside these female workers, there was a hostel for young female employees or teachers, who paid rent in return for accommodation and meals.⁶⁰ Thus the General Council turned the home into the centrepiece of the association's social welfare services, concentrating them in one facility to ensure they were interconnected and additionally, the annual reports show, to reduce costs by making each enterprise bear the relevant portion of the overheads.⁶¹

⁵⁷ *Las conferencias de señoras de la Sociedad de San Vicente de Paul en la República Argentina: en el 25° aniversario de la fundación del Consejo General 1889-1914* (hereafter *En el 25° aniversario*) (Buenos Aires: Compañía Sud-Americana de Billetes de Banco, 1914), pp. 54, 59, 62, 77-86, 333-47; Coni, *Higiene social, asistencia y previsión social*, pp. 621-6. See also Karen Mead, 'Gender, Welfare and the Catholic Church in Argentina: Conferencias de Señoras de San Vicente de Paul, 1890-1916', *The Americas*, 58: 1 (2001), pp. 91-119.

⁵⁸ *En el 25° aniversario*, pp. 92-3.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 77-86; Coni, *Higiene social, asistencia y previsión social*, pp. 621-26.

⁶¹ *En el 25° aniversario*, p. 79.

The Damas Vicentinas stressed the idea of work as a method for moral regeneration. They felt that certain types of jobs, such as the sewing, embroidery and knitting workshops, would divert some women from factories and from prostitution, imbuing them in turn with values such as discipline and a work ethic. Typically these jobs were considered short-term, until the young women could get married and quit such trades. Where this was not possible, the association offered its inmates some kind of training in order to ensure they could lead 'a decent life' in the future. Thus, as Marcela Nari notes, 'economic independence was perceived as a safeguard for female morals'.⁶²

All the social programmes managed by the General Council maintained a comparable level of performance during the 1920s and 1930s, except for the *Cocina Obrera* (Workers' Kitchen), whose level of assistance dropped markedly. By contrast, the number of beneficiaries of the *Asilo* in Villa Devoto and the *Casa de Santa Felicitas* increased during the 1930s.

As regards the association's general income, in the 1920s the Damas Vicentinas received an average of m\$*n* 378,264 per year from private sources and an average of m\$*n* 327,066 per year from state subsidies, with state contributions accounting for 46 per cent of the association's total income. In the 1930s the average income from private sources was m\$*n* 292,206 per year, while the average sum of state subsidies was m\$*n* 300,092, with state contributions accounting for 51 per cent of the association's total income. What this trend shows is that both state subsidies and private donations, despite year-on-year variations, reached comparable figures in absolute and relative terms for both periods, but with a certain decrease in privately generated income after the 1930s as a result of the 1929 crash and its economic impact.

A breakdown and analysis of the trends in the association's private sources of income for the whole period shows the importance of the profits derived from the workshops, lodgings and rentals, given the alarming decrease in member enrolments in the 1930s and the continuous ups and downs in private donations.

It is evident the Damas Vicentinas were funded less by private contributions and more by self-generated income. This brought the association closer to the ideal of partial self-sufficiency, expressed in the statement that 'in the St Vincent enterprise private initiative stands first, the state's action comes afterwards with a subsidiary role'.⁶³ Just as at the level of general income the association felt a primary duty to support its institutions from private sources, with state subsidies as a secondary contribution, so it applied this same idea to the justification of its social work. The Damas Vicentinas, like the Damas de Caridad, felt their role to be supplementary to state action. The cooperation they advocated was based on the understanding that charity work should lie in

⁶² Nari, *Políticas de maternidad*, p. 94.

⁶³ *En el 25° aniversario*, p. 36.

Table 2. *Annual Average of Lunchtime Meals at Cocina Obrera and Monthly Average of People Assisted at the Other Institutions Dependent on the General Council of the Conferencias de Señoras de San Vicente de Paúl, 1920–1940*

Year	Cocina Obrera*	Asilo in Villa Devoto**	Instituto de Economía Doméstica	Asilo de Viudas	Colonia Obrera in Nueva Pompeya	Casa de Santa Felicitas
1920	110,895	201	249	44	501	142
1921	89,548	193	312	45	522	133
1922	–	–	–	–	–	–
1923	83,622	194	274	46	520	135
1924	128,679	212	348	27	502	119
1925	157,559	214	319	30	507	108
1926	131,062	215	407	31	532	195
1927	–	217	353	27	524	–
1928	96,151	212	279	31	–	111
1929	87,795	220	271	31	514	–
1930	–	–	–	–	–	–
1931	94,919	255	306	25	541	114
1932	81,260	279	304	24	538	108
1933	78,412	227	272	22	531	153
1934	77,101	285	251	23	479	214
1935	80,398	293	329	25	480	225
1936	89,133	299	273	25	472	221
1937	85,123	296	317	23	481	183
1938	–	–	–	–	–	–
1939	–	–	–	–	–	–
1940	74,189	255	454	25	509	244

* Number of people/lunchtime meals per year.

** Monthly average number of people assisted. This measurement is valid for all the Council's institutions.

Source: *Memorias anuales del Consejo General de las Señoras de San Vicente de Paúl, 1920–40*. Author's own compilation.

the hands of non-profit associations and not of the state. The ladies argued that

The church and the state constitute two essentially independent communities ... [J]ust as humankind is divided into two sexes, each of which has its own duties and rights which, together, accomplish the whole of human endeavour, so too the church and the state form a great opposition, united and separated at the same time. The state in general is the manly expression of humankind (the nation), man with his self-awareness, strong will, potent action; the church, in general, represents humankind with faith, the pious woman devoted to God, who acts morally.⁶⁴

Thus, the Damas Vicentinas found that they could 'cooperate with and complement state action', as their institutions were 'not only manifestations of religious morality, but also high exponents of civic spirit'. They further claimed

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 35. Italics in original.

Table 3. *General Council of the Conferencias de Señoras de San Vicente de Paúl: State Subsidies and Private Income, 1920–1940 (m\$n)*

Year	Private income	Subsidies	Total income	% state contributions
1920	397,314	100,450	497,764	20
1921	375,669	124,850	500,519	25
1922	—	—	—	—
1923	283,881	263,975	547,856	48
1924	—	—	—	—
1925	413,016	399,633	812,649	49
1926	549,846	313,874	863,720	36
1927	320,303	396,433	716,736	55
1928	—	—	—	—
1929	307,820	690,250	998,070	69
1930	—	—	—	—
1931	332,013	267,041	599,054	45
1932	302,145	267,250	569,395	47
1933	281,908	328,672	610,580	54
1934	177,825	182,866	360,691	51
1935	262,473	221,825	484,298	46
1936	322,211	339,018	661,229	51
1937	301,052	399,860	700,912	57
1938	—	—	—	—
1939	—	—	—	—
1940	358,022	394,200	752,222	52

Source: *Memorias anuales del Consejo General de las Conferencias de Señoras de San Vicente de Paúl*, 1920–40; Congreso Nacional, 'Presupuesto anual del Diario de Sesiones', *Diario de Sesiones de la Cámara de Diputados*, 2 (1920), p. 800, 6 (1933), p. 459, 8 (1934), pp. 276–84, and 2 (1937), pp. 114–21. Author's own compilation.

that because the state viewed the association in the same way, it had chosen to finance the social work done by the association. State authorities had 'managed, without the enormous expense of the huge administrative body that such roles entail, to accomplish the paternal mission that is today assigned to the state with respect to the deprived classes'. Thus, the Damas Vicentinas had 'been able to spare them [the state authorities] the assembly of the colossal bureaucratic machine that in other countries is a requirement and an inescapable consequence of the existence of official charity'.⁶⁵

Various social actors acknowledged the significant role of this type of association, given the shortage of public institutions performing these tasks. The statement drafted by Panel XII of the First National Conference on Social Assistance held in 1933, presided over by Monseñor de Andrea and in charge of analysing, among other issues, the question of women's moral

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 36–7. These women disliked the 'colossal bureaucratic machine' of the state because they believed it had a scientific and bureaucratic view of public assistance that lacked moral guidance, something they could provide through charity. They also used this term to justify their claims for funding, arguing that they were helping the state's finances.

Table 4. *General Council of the Conferencias de Señoras de San Vicente de Paúl: Private Income (m.\$n)*

Year	Member enrolment	Donations	Interest and bonds	Lodging	Restaurant	Worker soup kitchen	Workshops	Rentals	Others	Total
1920	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	397,314
1921	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	375,669
1922	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
1923	4,872	13,949	21,543	163,657	—	16,672	7,868	55,318	—	283,879
1924	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
1925	7,039	18,000	16,411	189,906	22,443	31,511	7,604	83,467	36,632	413,013
1926	6,828	23,296	20,229	186,723	14,368	26,212	5,649	91,055	175,482	549,842
1927	3,358	4,400	17,290	164,763	—	22,781	16,240	91,468	—	320,300
1928	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
1929	3,748	1,517	12,782	192,809	—	17,559	3,489	75,914	—	307,818
1930	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
1931	2,347	8,900	16,068	195,078	—	18,983	2,964	78,878	8,792	332,010
1932	2,019	7,860	12,766	186,972	—	10,181	4,247	78,097	—	302,142
1933	1,609	29,860	14,881	174,754	—	6,810	3,726	50,265	—	281,905
1934	812	—	1,798	128,815	—	6,624	3,094	36,680	—	177,823
1935	906	4,060	15,814	173,503	—	7,527	3,281	55,432	1,947	262,470
1936	964	50,540	27,809	161,684	—	8,802	3,647	68,184	579	322,209
1937	685	22,481	19,067	180,615	—	—	3,197	65,926	9,078	301,049
1938	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
1939	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
1940	955	22,346	4,083	183,917	—	—	3,584	105,155	37,981	358,021

Source: *Memorias anuales del Consejo General de las Conferencias de Señoras de San Vicente de Paúl, 1920–40*. Author's own compilation.

protection, acknowledged that this was 'a social problem that public authorities have not yet addressed'. The panel suggested that this problem should be dealt with through the 'few existing laws' and the experience of private associations, 'a joint action [that] will enable the nation to reap the maximum benefit with the least expense and effort'.⁶⁶ According to the draft statement, it was the responsibility of public authorities, among other things, 'to officially acknowledge the associations devoted to this noble moral mission, granting them power to act whenever required'. They also had the duty to 'raise the necessary funds to build protection homes and moral uplift homes, and to support them'. This was virtually a duty of the state, since these associations pursued the goal of keeping women 'physically and morally healthy for society'. Private associations were to be responsible for 'founding, leading and managing protection or preventive homes and moral enhancement homes'.⁶⁷

Like the Damas de Caridad, the Damas Vicentinas constructed a representation of themselves as protective mothers of the nation by applying the notion of a feminised church role. This was what the association ladies could offer to society: by being the maternal face of the state, they were able not only to spare the state the cost of setting up lumbering bureaucratic agencies, but also to provide a moral message through their social work.

Matrons and social policy: by way of epilogue

It could be concluded that the three associations analysed here were strongly identified with Catholicism and that it was religious principle that guided these women's actions, although it was a principle which was also justified on civic and patriotic grounds. The women sponsored different social programmes, for while the Cantinas Maternales association played an important role both in health care and in social assistance, the Damas de Caridad devoted themselves to assisting defenceless children, whereas the Damas Vicentinas dealt mostly with the moral protection of women.

In terms of gender roles, these associations all promoted an ideal of domesticity, either by encouraging breastfeeding and imparting the basics of childcare, thus reinforcing the mother-child dyad, as in the case of the Cantinas Maternales, or by strengthening the ideal of the family, as in the cases of the Damas de Caridad and the Damas Vicentinas, who ensured that the women they served would become future good mothers and wives. Their programmes tended to carry a moralising message for these women. Both the Damas de Caridad and the Damas Vicentinas tended to normalise social situations through their house calls, performing marriages, baptisms and

⁶⁶ *Primera conferencia nacional de asistencia social*, vol. 3, p. 184.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 183, 190.

communions. However, they were also pragmatic and adapted their vision to the realities they encountered in order to prevent even worse scenarios. For example, whenever the Damas de Caridad encountered cases where mothers were forced to work and therefore neglect their homes, they created places for these women's children, trying to avoid what they considered a worse fate for these minors. The Damas Vicentinas accepted the fact that some women had to work for wages to be able to support themselves or their families and thus set up lodgings for these young women.

With regards to financing, the associations continued being subsidised during the period in question, and the subsidies remained at comparable levels both in the 1920s and in the 1930s. There was even an increase in the amount of money that the state granted to some of these associations in the 1930s. While the Cantinas Maternales saw an increase in subsidies, the Damas de Caridad started receiving money in return for specific social programmes dealing with the problem of abandoned children. Following the 1929 crash, funding became tight and the attempted solution was self-generation of private income. Both the Damas de Caridad and the Damas Vicentinas associations founded boarding houses and workshops that could ensure a continuous income stream to offset the variations in private donations, which helped the associations support themselves despite the economic crisis and its impact.

It is interesting that the Damas de Caridad and the Damas Vicentinas, which exist to this day, kept on acting in the field of social welfare during the Peronist governments, even though the national government cut off their subsidies, which forced them to adjust their finances and the social tasks they undertook.⁶⁸ Social policy under Peronism, apart from extending social benefits to the whole population, continued to use private money to implement social plans. The most relevant entity was the Fundación Eva Perón (Eva Perón Foundation, FEP), a private institution heavily supported by state subsidies, which covered the needs of unprotected women and children through halfway houses and the Casa de la Empleada for women and boarding schools for children – the very same social groups to which the matrons had been devoting themselves.⁶⁹

During the period covered here, the state adopted two different strategies concerning social policy. On the one hand, it entrusted voluntary associations

⁶⁸ The Damas de Caridad went from obtaining a national subsidy of m\$N 135,000 in 1947 to seeing this subsidy axed after 1948, thereafter receiving only provincial subsidies of m\$N 10,000, a figure that stayed more or less constant until at least 1952. Damas de Caridad, *Actas 1944–1948*, pp. 28–9, 100–1, 165–6, 230–1, 294–7; and *Actas 1948–1954*, pp. 48–51, 108–11, 172–5, 216–19, 264–7.

⁶⁹ For a view that highlights the continuities between pre-Peronist philanthropic action and FEP activities, see Guy, *Women Build the Welfare State*, chap. 6. For a detailed analysis of the FEP, see Carolina Barry, Karina Ramaciotti and Adriana Valobra (eds.), *La Fundación Eva Perón y las mujeres: entre la provocación y la inclusión* (Buenos Aires: Biblos, 2008).

with the implementation of welfare programmes for mothers, children and working women and continued financing them, especially in the 1930s, even when the loudest calls were made for more efficiency in health care and social welfare. This shows that the state still saw validity and value in the moral role claimed by the ladies from the various associations. Similarly, while upper-class women could attract or generate private funds for their programmes, either through donations or through their own resources, the state had no real incentive to replace their work, and sought only to exert greater control on the application of subsidies that it gave them.

On the other hand, the state started to get directly involved in some areas, particularly those related to the health and hygiene of mothers and children from the poorest classes, and abandoned and delinquent children. Overall there was a trend towards health care becoming progressively dominated by the higienistas, who from the 1920s and especially in the 1930s advocated direct intervention by the state in this area through the creation of public institutions. Given the sluggishness and cost of the state bureaucratic structure, however, private associations actually implemented many of the bills passed during this period. It was in this field that women's associational activity blossomed, such as in the areas of mothers' canteens and the guardianship of abandoned and delinquent children.

Finally, as regards the upper-class women's discourse, these associations based their activity on the notion that non-profit associations subsidised by governmental authorities constituted a different body, separate from the state, which nonetheless could be represented as the mothering face of the state. Having become the protective mothers of the nation and the state's moral face, these matrons could justify their social role in society, helping poor and needy women and minors with moral and material support, as well as helping the state to avoid becoming a 'colossal bureaucratic machine'.

Conclusion

By using a maternalistic discourse, women's associations exerted a significant influence on the definition of mothers' and children's needs and on the design of various programmes to meet those needs. Their justification for action centred on their beneficiaries' need for moral guidance – as defined by the associations. This implied not only a moral reform of the character of the working women, mothers and children these associations helped. Such a notion also resulted in selectivity in the apportioning of welfare aid and in the requirements for receiving it, quite counter to the idea of assistance as a social right. While elite women played a decisive role in the gestation and implementation of such programmes, most poor women and children actually depended on social assistance to cover their needs. Thus, social welfare became

a space where women were the main protagonists, both as the agents and the targets of social policy.

These social programmes and their underlying philosophy had a major influence on the process by which a social state in Buenos Aires emerged during the interwar period. At a very direct level, certain social programmes run by the associations – such as mothers' canteens, school canteens and house calls – proved to be spaces where proto-social policies were tested, later to be adopted by the state, acting alongside the associations. In most cases, however, women's associations required greater commitment by the state to the welfare of certain social groups in the form of a subsidy policy, and the state continued promoting social programmes managed by the matrons through financial transfer. That was the case with homes for abandoned or delinquent minors, homes for minors whose mothers had to work and homes for working women, all of which were meeting a demand the state could not handle. Without the help of private associations, many of the proposed or enacted social policies could not have materialised. In this sense, the associations contributed to the practical implementation of social legislation, thereby playing an important role in the emergence of a social state. However, even though the programmes managed by these high-society ladies provided benefits to the needy that had previously not existed or had been very partial, it is arguable that overall they had the effect of actually slowing down the development of direct state involvement in social welfare issues. In other words, the alliance between the state and private associations simultaneously widened the scope of social benefits but limited their democratisation, in the sense of universal access or entitlements.

This becomes more evident when Argentina is compared with the cases of Uruguay and Chile. Unlike these two countries, Argentina maintained a more structured and longer-term alliance between the state and private association matrons. Christine Ehrick has argued that Uruguayan upper-class women, while playing a similar role to that of their Argentine counterparts, retained less and shorter-term power than the latter. In a relatively brief period between 1910 and 1930, elite women moved from playing an important quasi-official role, leading publicly funded private organisations, to becoming marginalised from social assistance structures. This was precisely due to the parallel development of a welfare state that rendered their roles obsolete: they also lost the support of the elite and, consequently, private donations, became totally dependent on state subsidies and were finally replaced by women who were professionally trained by the state.⁷⁰ As pointed out in the historiography,

⁷⁰ Christine Ehrick, *The Shield of the Weak: Feminism and the State in Uruguay, 1903–1933* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2005), esp. chap. 3. For a comparison with Argentina, see her other articles, 'Affectionate Mothers and the Colossal Machine: Feminism, Social Assistance and the State in Uruguay, 1910–1932', *The Americas*, 58: 1

ultimately the relative historical weakness of the Uruguayan social and political elite in relation with its Argentine counterpart contributed to the birth of the Batllista state and of early welfare policies.⁷¹ Something similar happened in the case of Chile, where transition to a social assistance and social security system was the result of early social welfare policy, particularly through the creation of the Caja de Seguro Obligatorio (Compulsory Insurance Fund, CSO) in 1924. As Karin Roseblatt notes, this policy was emphasised during the Frente Popular (Popular Front) period (1938–52), when state intervention provided a counter-balance to the power of the Chilean elite, eliminated the charitable help provided to the poor by wealthy ladies, which was considered paternalistic, and promoted and extended a public social welfare system based on female social workers.⁷²

In the Argentine case, the development of a social state depended largely on private associations. Porteño elite ladies, thanks to their economic as well as social power and to their consequent alliance with the state, played a key role in the design and realisation of social-welfare policies, as opposed to their Uruguayan and Chilean counterparts, who were unable to maintain such a role. Historiography on the birth of social policy in Argentina has tended to focus on the interventionist role that the state started to play in the 1930s, mainly through studies of social legislation. However, this paper has argued that such studies have overlooked the persistent overlap between public efforts and private philanthropy in the generation and, most of all, implementation of these social policies, an overlap that allows us to better understand the very particular nature of the welfare regime that developed in Argentina through the middle of the twentieth century.

(2001), pp. 121–39; and ‘To Serve the Nation: Juvenile Mothers, Paternalism, and State Formation in Uruguay, 1910–1930’, *Social Science History*, 29: 3 (2005), pp. 489–518.

⁷¹ For differences in the political structure of Uruguay and Argentina, see Francisco Panizza, ‘Late Institutionalisation and Early Modernisation: The Emergence of Uruguay’s Liberal Democratic Political Order’, *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 29 (1997), pp. 667–91; and David Rock and Fernando López-Alves, ‘State-Building and Political Systems in Nineteenth-Century Argentina and Uruguay’, *Past and Present*, 167 (2000), pp. 176–202.

⁷² Karin Roseblatt, *Gendered Compromises: Political Cultures and the State in Chile, 1920–1950* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), esp. chap. 4. The Sociedad de Beneficencia controlled the maternal and child health care services of the CSO until 1932, when they were taken over by the CSO Medical Board. See María Soledad Zárate Campos, ‘Las madres obreras y el Estado chileno: la Caja de Seguro Obligatorio, 1900–1950’, in Sonia Montecino Aguirre (ed.), *Mujeres chilenas: fragmentos de una historia* (Santiago: Editorial Catalonia, 2008), pp. 129–37.

Spanish and Portuguese abstracts

Spanish abstract. Este artículo aborda el movimiento asociacionista femenino entre 1920 y 1940 en Buenos Aires y su relación con el surgimiento de un Estado social. Subsidiadas por el Estado, las asociaciones lideradas por las damas de la elite proveyeron de una importante cantidad de servicios de asistencia social para las madres, mujeres trabajadoras y niños y tuvieron una fuerte impronta en el diseño de políticas sociales. Si la historiografía concuerda en señalar que para 1930 la importancia del movimiento de mujeres comenzó a declinar, siendo reemplazada por los servicios de asistencia social públicos, este artículo pretende problematizar esta conclusión a través del análisis de tres de las asociaciones más importantes del período, dando cuenta de cómo éstas, convertidas en la faz maternal del Estado, mantuvieron un rol central en la provisión de asistencia social hasta bien entrada la década del treinta, contribuyendo así a que el Estado no se transformara en una ‘colosal máquina burocrática’.

Spanish keywords: asociaciones femeninas, políticas sociales, asistencia social, estado social, Argentina

Portuguese abstract. Este artigo examina o movimento de associação de mulheres entre 1920 e 1940 em Buenos Aires e sua conexão com a emergência de um estado social. Subsidiadas pelo estado, associações lideradas por mulheres da classe alta forneceram um número significativo de serviços de assistência social às mães, mulheres trabalhadoras e crianças e tiveram um impacto notável no planejamento de políticas sociais. Enquanto a historiografia concorda que até 1930 o significado deste movimento de mulheres com orientações filantrópicas começou a decair, sendo substituído por serviços estatais do bem-estar social, este artigo busca questionar tal conclusão ao analisar três das mais importantes associações de mulheres do período, mostrando como após tornarem-se a face maternal do estado, retiveram um papel central no fornecimento de assistência social até meados da década de 1930, assim contribuindo para prevenir que o estado se tornasse uma ‘máquina burocrática colossal’.

Portuguese keywords: associações de mulheres, políticas sociais, assistência, estado social, Argentina