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Soup kitchens, women and social policy: studies from Peru

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The worsening situation in Peru has profoundly affected the daily lives of poor women. State spending cuts coincided with the worst recession this century, and with the outbreak of terrorism. Soup kitchens, organized by women's groups, emerged from the early 1980s to address food shortages.¹

In 1996, a multi-disciplinary team from the Peruvian non-governmental organizations (NGOs) ALTERNATIVA, FOVIDA and INCAFAM, examined the challenges facing these kitchens, from the perspective of the women. Information was drawn from interviews with leaders and members of 12 soup kitchens in Lima; from the 21 women who took part in a workshop on soup kitchens; and interviews with leaders of the Federation of Organizations of Self-Managed Soup kitchens of Lima and Callao.

Soup kitchens

There are two types of soup kitchen: the self-managed variety that make decisions autonomously and negotiate agreements with various donors; and those that started as mothers' clubs, are recognized by the state, and depend on government programmes. Initially, the former merely prepared food, while the latter also engaged in such activities as day-care services and minor business enterprises (mainly involving sewing and knitting). Now many more soup kitchens are acting as bases for 'connected activities' — income-generation or social services aimed at cutting family expenses.²

Soup kitchens operate on communal premises that may be rented, borrowed, or owned. Working conditions depend on the space, infrastructure, equipment, and utensils. Membership also varies.

Well, I volunteered to take charge of the dispensary, but they don't pay me a wage, you see? So I need to work. I'm wasting my time here helping the doctor and not getting paid for my trouble.

The years go by and I'm permanently stuck in the soup kitchen. I give of my all to help others, but what's in it for me? That's why I'm thinking of leaving the soup kitchen for a while... All the women here have got jobs on the side. I've got to think about myself, my old age. I need a job too.

These tensions stem mainly from the fact that the women involved are unremunerated. Several women said that by leaving the soup kitchen they could earn more money. However, staying guarantees a secure supply of decent food. Further, the hours they spend cooking and taking part in connected activities are not overly demanding, and they work in their own neighbourhood near their children. However, we found that several women were suffering a conflict of ideals, where the desire to serve the community was tempered by the question of whether it was worthwhile to continue investing their own time and effort for no pay. For many leaders who are also in charge of connected activities, the conflict is intensified by the excessive workload.

I had too much on my plate having to find time for the soup kitchen and the dispensary as well. I had a double schedule because I was the zone co-ordinator. At that time we had 84 soup kitchens on the go... I'd have to shut the dispensary to go to the assembly. Someone would come round for their medicine but the doña wasn't there because she'd gone to the assembly.

However, other leaders do not feel the added strain, either because the extra work is not too demanding, because they see this as an investment rewarded by learning a new skill, or because the service benefits their families.

Benefits and sacrifices

Personal benefits and sacrifices

Women who get involved in connected activities, or those who work only on the food service side, can expect both personal and family benefits and sacrifices. However, in the soup kitchen, all the activities blend into a single daily experience, making it hard to pinpoint the area in which the learning or capacity-building process occurs.

In the case of simple soup kitchens, the chief benefit is access to cheap meals. There is also a sense of security in knowing that one can count on the emotional support provided through working in a friendly environment. This helped women to learn to communicate better and to speak with greater confidence both inside and away from the soup kitchen. They said this had shown them how to function in a group and to get along better with others. They also appreciated the training they received and what they have learnt about management, organization, and women's rights.

However, there are frustrations and sacrifices. Many women are increasingly convinced that soup kitchens do not satisfy their economic needs because they do not undertake activities to supplement their incomes, while their organizational or cooking efforts are unpaid. Additionally, many soup kitchen leaders are so over-burdened that their personal and family lives suffer. And the soup kitchens are often the scene of fierce and difficult disputes between members.

Soup kitchens with connected activities also have their share of benefits and sacrifices. Benefits include learning new skills (e.g. guinea-pig breeding, bread-making, pharmaceuticals management) or acquiring knowledge that can quickly be of use in the home (e.g. administering injections, treating illness, early child education), or that could serve in the future to set up a small business or workshop. Membership in a soup kitchen also provides access to certain 'perks', like medical attention, extra food, or medicines. Some women benefit from the possibility of earning a part-time income by working in dispensaries administering injections or standing in for others unable to work their shifts.

One drawback to participating in connected activities is that women receive little financial incentive to do so. Another is that it can be difficult to replace those in charge because only they have the administrative or productive skills. These women are under pressure not to give up their work, in spite of the added burden and the conflict with their family responsibilities.

I don't let on about my problems, at home at least. I've spent years... 11 years... in the soup kitchen. My kids were small back then. I've neglected them a lot. They're older now. There'd be no point leaving them breakfast served on the table or taking them their lunch: 'Here's your lunch. Eat.' I've treated them like objects. Now time has passed and they say to me: 'Mum, you spend loads of time at the soup kitchen and hardly any with us.' They're right.

' the soup kitchen for his sake so I decided to stand firm and that why I'm still here... I don't get bored with it. I've got to stay here because that's how I help. Even if its only a plate of food, it's still something. That shuts him up and he doesn't bother much any more. He's slowly coming to terms with my job.

Overall, however, women's involvement in soup kitchens has led to domestic tension and conflict. Sometimes the husband manages to forget his insecurity and distrust, while the women gain independence and confidence. However, it is rare for a husband to do his share of the housework: even when he is unemployed he is reluctant to help at home because he sees this as 'women's work'. It is usually the children — the daughters — who take on the household chores when their mothers are out. So, while men's initial rejection and hostility may have changed to resignation, appreciation, or even collaboration, there are no substantial or widespread changes towards gender equality and a fairer distribution of domestic labour.

Older children provide support by doing the housework and helping at the soup kitchen when they collect the day's meals. Children seem to recognize and value their mothers' contribution, but some are fiercely critical of the fact that they make no money, and imply that 'they are wasting their time.' Of course, each family situation influences how the children see things; but children tend to be more understanding and supportive than husbands.

Outlook for soup kitchen organizations

Soup kitchen and connected activities

Soup kitchen members know that they satisfy the food needs of the poor by providing low-cost and even free meals (for so-called 'welfare cases'). But they see the service merely as a palliative: if the kitchens were to disappear, there would be no solution to food shortages. However, many women probably feel the real solution lies within the family.

At the same time, women are also looking beyond the soup kitchen to ways to earn money for themselves and to secure employment. They do not see the connected activities as an effective means of solving their needs, nor as fulfilling their earlier expectations. On the face of it, women get involved in order to learn useful new skills.

Overall, the soup kitchens are the clearest and most solid example the members have of satisfying basic needs. The kitchens that also

undertake social service activities are seen as benefiting the community, while those that only operate a meals service or income-generation activities are seen as benefiting only the members and their families. Some feel that the soup kitchens should stick to providing a meal service, while others believe they should address women's need for childcare, literacy, self-esteem training, and income-generation activities. Some, however, consider that the soup kitchen is not a suitable environment for addressing women-specific problems, arguing that women's problems — like domestic abuse — are private matters, or that women-specific problems should be dealt with by the state.

Leaders who are considering whether to start up connected activities are well aware of critical issues that must be resolved beforehand. Apart from the problems inherent in any business activity, they understand the need for sound and efficient administration, which calls for dedication, time, and skills; care over the technical aspects of production; and machinery and equipment that are technologically competitive. External aspects mentioned were the importance of market research, publicity, and a marketing strategy to ensure the venture's profitability.

When embarking on social services, members emphasized the need for good co-ordination with state bodies like the Ministries of Health or Education, in order to optimize quality and gain support so that the activity can be properly structured and managed.

The soup kitchen women proposed three main courses of action:

1. *To improve the connected activity in progress:* Soup kitchens propose to continue and improve their existing activities. In income-generation activities this involves adapting administration and management, raising output and productivity, and improving product quality. The relationship with the soup kitchen would be unchanged, and the gains from the enterprise would benefit the collective. In social service activities, improvements would take the form of strengthening and expanding into other fields.
2. *To turn the activity into a small business:* This would involve volunteer work by members with the necessary skills and knowledge. Benefits would be individual, that is only for the members involved.
3. *To implement income-generation activities in those soup kitchens that currently offer only a meals service:* There is a strong desire for