

It is 2:30 in the morning and like so many other mornings, Senora Apolonia Martinez is waiting in line to receive her ration of water. She has been in line for over two hours, but does not complain -- she has grown accustomed to waiting for what the rest of the world take for granted. Water last arrived in Independencia, one of Lima's shantytowns, three days ago. After waiting for three hours, the supply ran out before Senora Apolonia could receive her portion. That night, she, along with many others, was forced to return to her adobe hut up the mountain with no water for her family. Tonight, she hopes, the story will be different.

This is an unfortunately familiar scene to Senora Apolonia and the other six million shantytown dwellers in Lima, Peru. Although many of the conditions in Lima's shantytowns are similar to those in other urban impoverished neighborhoods throughout the world, there is one factor which distinguishes Peru's shantytowns from others: women who have responded to the direness of the circumstances by forming grassroots organizations to improve their situation.

While most people living here do not hold steady jobs (Peru's un- and underemployment rate is between 80% and 90%), the women have undertaken the arduous task of meeting their families' basic nutritional needs by developing communal kitchens. Communal kitchens function well, not only because they are economical and time-saving, but because of the extraordinary strong spirit of cooperation between the women. "We know that if we want our children to eat one nutritious meal a day, we must all cooperate and contribute," says Senora Isabel, treasurer of a kitchen.

The self-started communal kitchen functions somewhat like a cooperative: each member is required to complete certain weekly rotational duties, including cooking and distributing the meals once a week, retrieving

Lima's Communal

A Means for the Present

by: Beryl K. Jacobs

water for the day, descending the mountain to the market to buy food for the day's meal, and attending and participating in the weekly member meetings. In addition to her weekly duties, each member pays a share of the costs for the food, usually about ten cents per ration per day. The number of members of each communal kitchen ranges from 15 to 300 local women, each requiring from 4 to 14 rations per day.

Communal kitchens abound throughout the shantytowns, creating a highly organized network. Often located in one of the member's homes, each kitchen belongs to a centralized organization which acts as the only representative voice for the community's kitchens to the government or to non-governmental aid agencies. These organizations became increasingly important when the newly elected president took office in August, 1990.

On August 8, 1990, Peru's newly-elected president, Alberto Fujimori, implemented a harsh economic shock program which overnight declared a 3,000 percent increase in gasoline, and an average of a 700 percent increase on household staples like sugar, rice and kerosene. As a result of the economic shock, 60% of Peru's population is now considered to be in a state of extreme poverty, unable to afford even basic food items without some form of outside assistance. The government had guaranteed that as part

of the post-shock aid program, U.S.\$ 415 million in food aid to the most needy would be disseminated. Between August 8th, when the program was implemented, and at the end of December, when it ended, not even half of the proposed aid had arrived to the poor. Some shantytowns saw less aid than others. In the shantytown where I worked, for instance, one of Lima's poorest shantytowns, the women could count on one hand the number of times "aid" had arrived. With these new prices, the women are sometimes able to cook only a watery soup.

Lunch preparations begin at 7:00 a.m. The members in rotation that day decide on the day's menu, and descend to the market to buy the day's supplies, while others stay behind and begin with the preparations. Most residents of Independencia live in adobe huts without even the basic necessities like water, sewage or electricity. Hygienic conditions depend on the water supply; water is generally scarce. Water is usually used several times: first, to clean the grains, then to wash the vegetables, and, finally, to wash the pots. Fresh water is used only as a soup base. Throughout the morning each family delivers their pots and buckets to receive the day's rations, and by 11:30 distribution begins. On a good day, the meal consists of soup, a main dish and rice, however, a full meal like this has become increasingly

Kitchens:

and a Hope for the Future

rare since the beginning of August 1990.

The women have formed the kitchens as democratic organizations whose posts include a president, a secretary, a treasurer, and a health representative. Every decision is brought before the weekly assembly, discussed, and voted upon. In these meetings, the women of ten reflect on the community-wide and personal impact of the kitchen. For many, this is the first time that they are interrelating with other women on a regular basis.

Although the houses in the shantytowns are usually situated close together with little or no privacy, an atmosphere of collaboration and interaction is still very rare. In fact, a woman's involvement in the kitchens is often the first time in her life that she interacts closely with her neighbors, and more importantly, makes a contribution to the community. Senora Apolonia was friendly with some of her neighbors, many of whom are refugees from the war-torn region of Ayacucho, before she formed the kitchen. Now, the activity of the kitchen demands a regular commitment and constant interaction. "As a result of the kitchen, the neighborhood has become much more of a real community. Neighbors are working together, helping one another," says Senora Apolonia.

Relationships grow and ties between women become stronger as a result of the kitchens and the necessity of organizing. This new interaction results in the change of certain attitudes in the lives of everyone involved: the attitude of spouses toward their wives, the attitude of members of the general community toward the women, and most importantly, the woman's own attitude towards herself.

The women, most of whom are recent immigrants from the highlands, have been raised to believe that as women they are inherently inferior to men and unworthy of individual rights. Women are taught that men are more deserving of basic necessities and opportunities such as food and education, and that it is their role to serve the men in their lives.

As a result of their involvement and leadership in the communal kitchens, women often begin to break with these traditional roles. Senora Marlina says, "At first, my husband was opposed to the idea of my forming a kitchen. He said that my place was in the home, taking care of the children. He felt threatened that I was doing something on my own. But once he saw that I was completely committed to forming the kitchen, and once I was able to make him understand that the kitchen would ultimately benefit him, our children and the neighbors, he changed his view. Now sometimes he

even helps."

Community politics and other grassroots movements are often the next step for women leaders -- areas that they are able to approach with new-found self-confidence and respect. Marches, protests, and other community actions to demand schools, water, electricity or other rights for the shantytown are often organized and led by women. Working in the kitchens has helped these women to identify their rights, and to take the leadership in organizing to demand them. This year, Senora Apolonia was elected the community's public health representative.

Despite the profound hardships that the women who form the communal kitchen must face, including lack of water and electricity, escalating food prices, dire unemployment, malnutrition, and absent health services, the spirit of the women in the shantytowns remains undaunted. Even the nearby bombs and gunfire from the ongoing battle between the army and the guerrilla organizations do not intimidate these fighters. The women are accustomed to fighting for their homes and the few basic rights that they have gained. This grassroots involvement is the initial stage of the empowerment of Peruvian women. It is the springboard for women taking control of their own destiny.

"Since I formed the kitchen, I feel a new self-respect. I think that other people in the neighborhood notice a difference in me. My husband says that I am a new woman, and that some day I'll run for president!" says Senora Apolonia.

Beryl K. Jacobs is a graduate of Cornell University. She worked at Americas Watch, a human rights organization based in New York before going to Peru. She has just finished a year of working with women's grassroots organizations in the shantytowns of Lima, Peru. She shares her experience with us in this article.