

Women's Institute fosters identity and culture

by

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The Women's Training Institute, otherwise known as IFFI, its Bolivian acronym, supports women's initiatives in the *barríos populares* or shanty towns of Cochabamba, Bolivia. Founded in 1981 as a local alternative to food aid programs of some international donor organizations, IFFI works with the community by setting up popular kitchens. In addition to distributing food, it provides training programs, technical assistance and organizational support, and helps to launch projects designed to strengthen women's economic independence.

Indigenous people and women are overrepresented at the bottom of Bolivia's social and economic structure. IFFI, which functions as a collective, works with seven women's organizations in the shanty towns of Cochabamba where about 50 percent of the women have recently migrated from indigenous communities in rural areas or mining towns. These women are survivors in a society that penalizes them both for their gender and their ethnicity. They still wear their typical costumes and speak their own language. They maintain strong family bonds and usually return to their community during harvest time.

For five hundred years, indigenous people have struggled to maintain their identity within a society that denies their unique culture and spirituality. Indigenous women have lost much of their separate identity through migrating to cities and adapting to an alien culture. They continue to be confronted by the hard-

ship and violence of urban subcultures and ghettos. The city imposes a different language (Spanish), the alien value of individualism, and a highly structured class system on indigenous people. And their interests, opinions and beliefs are often ridiculed by urban dwellers.

IFFI's training programs help to rebuild and restore women's identity. This is a slow process because colonial values seem to have become rooted in their being. The hardest thing for indigenous women to overcome is their fear and lack of confidence. But they have a thirst for knowledge and they express the wish that the training had begun years ago. While the oldest ones feel it is too late for them, they participate for the sake of their children.



One speaks for many when she says: "I do not want my children to suffer as I do. I work endlessly to make life better for them."

About the authors: Michelle Decherellette, Natividad Zambrana and Katia Uriona have been working with IFFI since its inception.

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