

POTS, POTATOES, AND PROGRESS FOR WOMEN:
RETHINKING FEMINISM IN POST-CRISIS PERU

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By 10 AM, the female office-goers of downtown Lima settle into a mid-morning coffee break around the office kitchen or send out their twentieth e-mail of the day. By 10 AM, the female politicians of the metropolis have addressed calls from constituents and attended important meetings. By 10 AM, the women who are housewives and members of the *comedores populares* (community kitchens) on the outskirts of town have opened the kitchens; taken stock of the pantries; planned a menu for the day; gone to the market to replenish the stores of perishable goods; prepared, measured, and cooked the ingredients; and are laying out the service wares for the daily lunch that they provide to families, friends, and neighbors of their communities at a reduced cost. Do housewives who cook all day have a place alongside the powerful businesswomen and female political leaders of Lima? Which of these groups of women accomplishes the most in the name of feminism? What exactly constitutes feminism in the Peruvian context?

Problematically, most feminist critics would place the professional and political women on one end of the feminist spectrum, leaving the women who feed their communities through their work with the *comedores* on the other end. These critics, however, observe the women of the *comedores* through a distinctly Western lens of feminism. They focus primarily on the act of cooking and fail to account for the specific local conditions of Lima, Peru (which, quite clearly, differ greatly from those of the United States or Western Europe). When looking at the intertwined social, political, and economic context of Lima in which poor women established and maintained these kitchens, a more complete picture of the *comedores* and of Peruvian feminism emerges. I argue that, despite seeming to reinforce traditional gender roles through cooking and general caretaking, the varied work of the women who participate in the *comedores* has positively impacted attitudes and behaviors regarding gender equality in the Peruvian

context. Far from shackling women to stoves, the *comedores* organizations empower women to take action within their communities and challenge the traditional place of a woman within society.

As a survival strategy to weather the drastic convulsions of Peru's economy in the 1980s, poor women in metropolitan Lima—disproportionately impacted by the economic crises and subsequent neoliberal intervention measures—banded together and pooled their resources to create these *comedores*. However, despite economic stabilization which should have rendered the kitchens obsolete, the phenomenon continued. I contend that the enduring nature of the *comedores* is evidence that the kitchens represent a space of female emancipation in line with the definitions of feminism coming from within Peru. I examine the continuation of the *comedores* in relation to the non-economic needs they fulfill. Although the kitchens emerged as a survival strategy to feed communities and overcome women's economically inferior situations, they quickly took on other meanings for their members. These women did more than toil over steaming stoves. They also developed organizational and managerial skills while creating social community networks of support and empowerment. Because of this combination of activities, the *comedores* (despite contradictory critiques by Western-oriented feminists) reflect a space of female emancipation.

In order to illustrate that the kitchens serve the feminist agenda as defined by the local context in Lima, I will emphasize a few main points. To begin, I provide historic and economic context—specifically, an explanation of the ways in which Peru's economic meltdown and subsequent corrective policies impacted women to a greater degree than men. Then, I illustrate that the ideological foundations of the *comedores* support their extra-economic (and empowerment-oriented) functions by evaluating a management handbook from 1987. Next,

using an article by a Peruvian feminist, I demonstrate that the kitchens withstood attacks from Western-oriented feminist critics throughout the 1990s. From there, I analyze YouTube videos and online news articles that suggest an increasingly political function of the *comedores* in recent years. Finally, I claim that the primary critiques of the kitchens are informed by a traditional, Western model of feminism that is inappropriate when attempting to measure the advances of the women in Lima in local and culturally relevant terms. This case study of gender and labor in metropolitan Lima illustrates the necessity of assessing the women's movement in Latin America through the lens of the women who spearhead these efforts and according to their own local definitions of empowerment, emancipation, and equality.

Roots of Economic Necessity

The economic crisis of Peru, as elsewhere in Latin America during the 1980s, produced a perfect storm of economic hardship that deeply affected women, creating the need that inspired the development of the *comedores*. A combination of astronomical inflation, unemployment, public spending cutbacks, and a ballooning population devastated the economy and resulted in acute deterioration of living standards and quality of life. President Alan García's economic agenda (during his 1985-1990 term)—a “heterodox experiment in economic policy” following the re-democratization of Peru after the military dictatorship—clearly failed, resulting in massive national debt and a period of sustained negative GDP growth¹. A few statistics illustrate the magnitude of the problem. From 1986 until 1989, the average yearly inflation topped 1,160 percent, while debt represented 47.3 percent of the nation's GDP in 1988.² Additionally, in a

¹ Maruja Barrig, “Women, Collective Kitchens, and the Crisis in Peru,” in *Emergences: Women's Struggles for Livelihood in Latin America*, eds. John Friedmann, Rebecca Abers, Lilian Autler (Los Angeles: UCLA Latin American Center Publications, 1996), 59.

² Janet Tanski, “The Impact of Crisis Stabilization and Structural Adjustment on Women in Lima, Peru,” *World Development* 22, no. 11 (1994): 1630.

span of only eight years (1980-1988), real wages fell by 50 percent.³ Jobless and with significantly reduced purchasing power, Peruvians were in a state of desperation as their government turned to structural adjustment programs during the presidency of Alberto Fujimori. The existing problems of inflation and unemployment were then compounded by Fujimori's economic policies, exacerbating the problem of food security in Lima's poorer neighborhoods.

As a result of the crisis and structural adjustment programs that followed, people were left to their own devices to fill the sudden gap between what the government previously provided and the greatly reduced services. Since a significant number of these eliminated goods and services fell under the purview of the household, household managers (generally women) had to augment their roles in order to provide for their families. Beginning in 1990, President Fujimori instituted a series of economic reforms in line with World Bank and International Monetary Fund recommendations (structural adjustment programs—SAPs). Essentially, the so-called “Fujishocks” shifted burdens from the state to the individual. Fiscal austerity measures resulted in drastic reductions in public spending on programs that for years had supported Peruvians of the lower economic classes. By increasing sales taxes and the controlled prices for basic needs items and simultaneously decreasing food subsidies,⁴ Fujimori decimated the social safety net, leaving countless Peruvians precariously close to abject poverty and hunger. Overall, social spending dropped to 13 percent of total government expenditures in 1990 from 25 percent during the 1970s.⁵ These drastic spending cutbacks and the unfavorable conditions already in place fell squarely on the shoulders of household managers—typically women.

³ Barrig, “Women, Collective Kitchens,” 64.

⁴ Tanski, “The Impact of Crisis,” 1630.

⁵ Barrig, “Women, Collective Kitchens,” 65.

Both the crisis of the 1980s and the subsequent Fuji-shocks of the 1990s negatively impacted women to a greater extent than men. This dimension is important because in finding ways to overcome their inferior economic statuses and achieve a greater degree of economic parity with men (such as through the *comedores*), women thereby challenged the structural status quo of an intrinsically unequal system. Generally, male-biased or even gender-neutral SAPs exacerbated unequal initial conditions, pushing the poor women of Lima even deeper into poverty and to the periphery of the economy. During the crisis, institutional and cultural barriers to wage employment, educational opportunities, and ownership and access to resources hit women especially hard.⁶ For example, women who were fortunate enough to find paid employment earned merely 51.3 percent of average male earnings in 1974.⁷ These women then had to balance their wage labor with their domestic labor, creating a double burden of earning income outside of the home and caring for children before and after work hours. Thus, women (who are overrepresented as heads of household in lower economic classes)⁸ were so burdened with various forms of labor that adapting to rapidly changing economic situations such as the Fuji-shocks proved nearly impossible.⁹ These changes themselves produced additional hardship for women attempting to run a household in Peru.

As for the structural adjustment programs, the methods of the Fuji-shock approach directly impacted women's abilities to care for their families. When the government cut food

⁶ Lawrence Haddad, Lynn R. Brown, Andrea Richter and Lisa Smith, "The Gender Dimensions of Economic Adjustment Policies: Potential Interactions and Evidence to Date," *World Development* 23, no. 6 (1995): 887. Although Haddad et al. ultimately decide that not enough evidence exists to claim that SAPs negatively impact women, they do acknowledge unequal initial conditions.

⁷ Tanski, "The Impact of Crisis," 1637.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 1628.

⁹ As Haddad et al. explain, "women's additional roles in the 'unrecognized' economy, such as household management, reproduction, and child care, impose additional constraints on women's adaptability to respond to changes within the 'recognized' economy initiated by macroeconomic policy," "The Gender Dimensions," 883.

subsidies and raised price standards for staple goods, women were forced to rethink their options for obtaining food and caring for the family—they often had to spend more time and energy seeking out lower prices and purchase “less prepared, more time-intensive food.”¹⁰ The budget cuts for social spending plus the increased time required to seek out affordable goods taxed women to the extreme in their role as food providers and household managers. Economist Janet Tanski’s assessment of the effects of SAPs on women in Peru provides evidence of the situation of women as a result of Fujimori’s adjustment policies. Looking at several criteria (“female poverty, female unemployment, job segregation, male/female wage differentials and women in the informal sector”),¹¹ Tanski confirms that the government’s policy to shift economic burdens to the people greatly impacted women more so than men.¹² In the face of this structural and entrenched gender inequality, it is all the more impressive then that the women of Lima were able to find the time and energy to solve their own problems through programs such as the *comedores populares*.

The Kitchens Emerge

Although the fiscal crisis of the 1980s and the Fuji-shocks of the 1990s ensured that securing food was a daily struggle for poor Peruvians living in Lima, the women of these neighborhoods confronted that challenge head-on by creating community networks to feed their families and neighbors. Through the *comedores populares*, women were able to pool their families’ resources and purchase goods collectively, thereby obtaining lower prices and facilitating more efficient food preparation. As feminist sociologist Amy Lind explains, “rather

¹⁰ Ibid., 884.

¹¹ Tanski, “The Impact of Crisis,” 1633.

¹² For example, from 1979 to 1992, female unemployment was typically double that of male employment, Ibid., 1634.

than directly demand social benefits from the state, the women designed autonomous, self-help solutions based on their own resources.”¹³ This scenario serves as a prime example of the empowering nature of the *comedores*—the women observed a need and creatively, independently developed a solution to address it.

The kitchens emerged as independent grassroots organizations, but the concept of the *comedores* proved so successful that these entities were replicated and emerged throughout Lima and beyond. Many of the *comedores* took advantage of existing community organizations, such as Mothers’ Clubs or Glass of Milk Clubs that also addressed meeting daily needs within the neighborhood setting.¹⁴ Departing from earlier templates, however, these groups were “part emergency food programme, part self-help initiative.”¹⁵ This combination of goals also speaks directly to the emancipating aspect of the *comedores* since a foundational function of the kitchens was to focus on self-help. Eventually, umbrella organizations emerged with the aim of facilitating the foundation and maintenance of *comedores*. The *Federación de Mujeres Organizadas en Centrales de Comedores Populares Autogestionarios y Afines de Lima Metropolitana* (FEMOCCPAALM) worked specifically with kitchens in metropolitan Lima to assist in both daily operations and broader issues that affected all *comedores*, such as government threats to reduce the already limited subsidies that many kitchens receive.¹⁶ The kitchens, independent yet supported by umbrella organizations, flourished not only as emergency food assistance programs but also as nuclei of self-help networks and activities for local women.

¹³ Amy Lind, “Gender, Development and Urban Social Change: Women’s Community Action in Global Cities,” *World Development* 25, no. 8 (1997): 1209.

¹⁴ Maxine Molyneux, “Change and Continuity in Social Protection in Latin America: Mothers at the Service of the State?” (UNRISD program paper, 2007), 32.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ While the kitchens are largely sustainable, many do rely on some combination of government subsidies and/or donations from various aid organizations.

The daily operations of the *comedores* vary from kitchen to kitchen, but each entity generally follows a similar schedule.¹⁷ The average *comedor* typically includes between 35 and 100 members who divide the tasks of running the kitchen and all of its associated activities into shifts.¹⁸ On the day of a member's designated shift, she arrives to the building (which varies in quality from improvised shacks devoid of running water to formal, multi-storied buildings compete with electricity and plumbing) and begins working to complete the daily tasks: counting the existing supply stocks, buying fresh food from the market, obtaining cooking fuel and water, preparing the food, distributing the rations, and cleaning the building and equipment at the end of service.¹⁹ Estimates suggest that the *socias* (members) throughout metropolitan Lima produced 60-120 meals each day, feeding up to six percent of Lima's population during their peak.²⁰ This is certainly plausible given that by 1991 the number of *comedores* in Lima had increased to 5,112 from 3,093 just the year before.²¹ Through their operations, these 5,000 kitchens fed reduced cost meals to the community while helping to provide for their own families.

It is clear then that the women of the *comedores* independently developed local solutions to the issue of hunger within their communities. Less clear, however, is the women's impact on the feminist movement of Lima that emerged during the same years in which the *comedores* first blossomed. The principal critiques of the kitchens stemmed from the fact that they were private,

¹⁷ Celia Blondet and Carmen Montero, *Hoy: Menú Popular* (Lima: Instituto de Estudios Peruanos/UNICEF, 1995), provide a wealth of information about the daily operations of the kitchens as well as numerous statistics concerning the types and functions of the kitchens. Although their work was published in 1995, the information provides a fairly complete picture of the evolution of the kitchens up to that point and their widespread presence during the 1990s.

¹⁸ Luiba Kogan, "Soup Kitchens, Women and Social Policy: Studies from Peru," *Development in Practice* 8, no. 4 (1998): 471.

¹⁹ Blondet and Montero, *Hoy: Menú Popular*, 86.

²⁰ Molyneux, "Change and Continuity," 33.

²¹ Blondet and Montero, *Hoy: Menú Popular*, 65.

feminine, and practical rather than public, feminist and ideological.²² Accordingly, feminist scholars who were aligned with traditional, Western models of feminism found that the kitchens focused on small, non-ideological problems and simultaneously retrenched traditional gender roles by cooking instead of furthering female emancipation through more traditionally feminist activity such as street protests against systemic patriarchy within the Peruvian state. However, by focusing exclusively on the food preparation aspect of the kitchens and ignoring additional activities sponsored by the kitchens, the Western-oriented feminist critics of the kitchens failed to account for the aspects of the development and transformation of the *comedores* that suggest an alternative, more socially relevant construction of feminism and female empowerment.

In order to counter these critiques against the *comedores*, I will illustrate a few key examples of the ways in which the women's participation in these community kitchens promotes female emancipation in the local context of Lima, Peru. First, the kitchens are spaces of feminine empowerment as a result of the non-economic needs they address—from providing emotional support to offering education opportunities not typically available to the poorer women of Lima. Second, the kitchens survived the feminist attacks of the 1990s precisely because of women's continued participation, illustrating that the members perceived their own work to be an integral and useful part of the larger women's movement. Third, the politicization of the *comedores* as seen through increased attention from new media suggests that their work actually does satisfy the public>private criterion of Western feminists. Finally, a comparison of Western-oriented

²² These three dichotomies of private/public, feminist/feminine, and practical/ideological are discussed at great length in Serena Cosgrove, *Leadership from the Margins: Women and Civil Society Organizations in Argentina, Chile, and El Salvador* (New Brunswick, New Jersey and London: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 10. For additional explication of these three frameworks, see: Elizabeth Maier and Nathalie Lebon, *Women's Activism in Latin America and the Caribbean: Engendering Social Justice, Democratizing Citizenship* (New Brunswick, New Jersey and London: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 6 and Lynn Stephen, *Women and Social Movements in Latin America: Power from Below* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997). Although these comparisons have generally fallen out of favor even with Western-oriented feminists, their use in the critique of the kitchens remains integral to understanding the gendered discourse surrounding the *comedores* during the 1980s and 1990s.

feminists and those feminist scholars who approach their work through a more local lens demonstrates that the Western model of feminism simply does not apply to the case of the *comedores* in Lima due to a complex combination of social, political, and economic factors. Ultimately, in expressing these claims, I will suggest that the community kitchen organizations of Lima afforded women a new concept of gender identity in which they could overcome gender-based economic inequalities, provide families and neighbors with vital nourishment, and gain unprecedented levels of respect from both themselves and their communities as a whole.

Serving Food *and* Non-Economic Needs

The title of “community kitchens” is perhaps a bit misleading given the complex ideology behind the organizations and the wide range of associated activities that they offer. One particular piece of evidence, a handbook published in 1987, speaks to these characteristics of the *comedores*. This handbook, *La Organización de la Mujer y los Comedores Populares*, was published by the *Centro Latinoamericano de Trabajo Social* (CELATS) to aid women in the organization and maintenance of their *comedores*. While CELATS did not directly organize the creation of the community kitchens, this foundation sought to ensure that the women who set out to do so would have adequate information regarding how to create and operate a *comedor*. The handbook is divided into three separate sections, each with a distinct educational goal: “*los comedores, las familias populares y el problema alimentario*,” “*factores que influyen en el desarrollo de los comedores populares*,” and “*la organización interna de los comedores*.”²³ Thus, the book aims to educate women in a variety of areas—why the kitchens are necessary, how the kitchens develop, and the best methods of internal organization.

In order to adequately explain these complex topics, the book employs a variety of methods and even instances of democratic organization, evidence that the kitchens stood for

²³ CELATS, *La Organización de la Mujer y los Comedores Populares* (Lima, Peru: CELATS, 1987), 3.

something deeper than meals. To utilize the handbook, the women first had to organize themselves into small groups then elect a discussion moderator and a secretary.²⁴ After that brief exercise in democracy, the women would work their way through the handbook, encountering various types of information and exercises—charts, texts, graphs, several types of questions (fill in the blank, check the box, and short answer), and even cartoons. While some of the content appears infantile at best and demeaning at worst (particularly the cartoons), the political and ideological agenda contained within the book overshadows those surface flaws. Rather than an instructional guide on how to boil large batches of potatoes or tips for seasoning meals on a budget, the handbook is a manual for grassroots organization that explores the complex issues behind the nation's food security issues and the internal structures of a successful *comedor popular*.

This educational material illustrates that the kitchens serve a basic, material, concrete, and practical need but also provide a space in which women can come together in solidarity, working cooperatively to solve problems, formulate best practices, and further their education. The handbook explains that in addition to receiving food for the family, women can expect to have more free time outside of their assigned shifts since the other members will be doing the cooking.²⁵ Additionally, the handbook explains the issue of food security and the politics of food assistance.²⁶ This type of information allows women to obtain a better understanding of their circumstances which is, of course, the first step in taking action to confront those circumstances. While the final chapter of the book is dedicated to more practical aspects of running an effective

²⁴ Ibid., 4.

²⁵ Ibid., 9. Instead of women having to prepare every meal for their family each day, the members of the *comedores* spend a large portion of one day serving their shift. This frees time for them on the remaining days during which they can either spend more time with the children, pursue income-earning activities, or exchange ideas and experiences with the other members in an atmosphere of support and solidarity.

²⁶ Ibid., 23.

comedor popular (including information about human and physical capital and managing hesitant spouses), the other information clearly illustrates the importance of non-economic ideas and activities that accompanied the kitchens from their earliest years.

Surviving the Feminist Attacks

As the kitchens developed in the 1980s, the Peruvian feminist movement emerged alongside them and eventually stood as a counterforce of contrasting ideology and methodology throughout the 1990s. Whereas the *comedores* emerged as an organic response to localized issues of poverty in Lima, the feminist movement developed among predominantly wealthy women and female intellectuals (where it remains today)²⁷ who fashioned their philosophies on existing models of feminism from the United States and Western Europe. This traditional concept of feminism left little room for reinterpretation. In order to qualify as truly feminist, the action of an individual or organization must be public, feminist, and ideological rather than private, feminine or practical. The Western-inspired feminists of Peru “considered themselves to be at the vanguard of the women’s movements” throughout the formation of their movement during the 1980s and well into the 1990s.²⁸ The fact the women of this self-proclaimed vanguard considered themselves to be ideologically superior quickly drove a wedge between the strict feminist movement and other movements that the women of Lima conceived, organized, and executed with the goal of improving conditions for all women.

During the 1990s, the actions of the feminist vanguard seemed less concerned with empowering women and more concerned with imposing their rules and structure on other feminist movements. In classifying the *comedores* as non-feminist, the feminist elite blindly yet

²⁷ Maritza Villavicencio, “The Feminist Movement and the Social Movement: Willing Partners?” in *Compañeras*, ed. Gaby Küppers (London: Latin American Bureau, 1994), 60.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 63.

profoundly devalued the efforts of the women running the kitchens. The general sentiment of the Western-oriented feminists within Peru (and from outside as well) was that the *comedores* perpetuated “bondage to housework.”²⁹ Additionally, the vocal critics doubted the bottom-up approaches of the community kitchens which directly opposed the top-down methods favored by the traditional feminists. The greatest complaint of the kitchens’ critics, however, was that the *comedores* were so concerned with addressing practical concerns that their activities could accomplish little in the efforts to promote more ideological struggles, such as questioning the gender inequalities within the Peruvian governmental structure. Each of these criticisms that the feminists hurled at their cooking companions throughout the 1990s was directly inspired by their Western affiliations. Because the critics were so preoccupied with bringing traditional, Western feminism to Latin America, they ignored the possibilities that the women of the kitchens were contributing to creating a new definition of feminism based on the specific, local context of Lima, Peru.

For each instance of criticism, Peruvian sociologist and cultural commentator Maritza Villavicencio explains how the kitchens were able to counter the era of feminist critiques and thrive well beyond the 1990s. Her article in Gaby Küppers’ compilation, *Compañeras*,³⁰ offers a valuable perspective from within the Peruvian context. Whereas the feminist critics claimed that the organization of the *comedores* merely perpetuated traditional gender roles, Villavicencio explains that the members of the kitchens certainly did not view their work in that way.³¹ This contradiction between the self-perception of the members and the attitudes of the feminist critics

²⁹ Ibid., 64.

³⁰ Gaby Küppers, *Compañeras* (London: Latin American Bureau, 1994).

³¹ Villavicencio, “The Feminist Movement,” 64. Specifically, Villavicencio notes that, “The actual statements of the women themselves, who stress the political aspect of their work and their own personal development, seem more essential for me, for they succeed in creating space and time for themselves through their work in the soup kitchens.”

clearly demonstrates the problematic nature of applying Western feminism to a non-Western context. Additionally, whereas the feminists balked at the use of grassroots organization to further the feminist agenda, the bottom-up tactics of the *comedores* allowed the women to focus on the urban lower classes and develop new strategies for popular movements.³² The hierarchical structure of the feminist vanguard, in contrast, actually served as a divisive mechanism, separating the feminist leadership from the masses of women they purported to represent.

Finally, the women of the *comedores* resolved the issue of the practical/ideological dichotomy by reframing practical struggles as ideological ones. The feminist critics held a very limited view of what counted as an ideological struggle in the context of their movement: action aimed at instituting broad, sweeping, structural changes. However, instead of focusing on intangible ideology, community kitchen members advocated change on a smaller but more accessible scale.³³ Ultimately, while the Peruvian feminists of the 1990s focused on feminism for the sake of feminism, the women of Lima's *comedores* sought concrete improvements for the sake of furthering female emancipation in their communities. By focusing on tangible gains with a concrete and visible strategy, the kitchen volunteers ensured that their neighbors ate while forming the foundations for the politicization of the kitchens that would fully emerge during the 2000s.

Increasing Politicization and Publicity of the Kitchens

Although political and ideological agendas have characterized the *comedores* since their inception, the advent of Internet-based new media means that the ideologically charged activities of the kitchens are now more public and known than ever before. This increase in media

³² Ibid.

³³ As Villavicencio notes, "Starting from their collective, organized experience of the grassroots, they aim to change their political and social surroundings. As a result of their daily confrontations, the existing power structures are fundamentally challenged, Ibid., 66.

coverage amplifies the politicization of the kitchens that was already in motion as early as the 1980s. Whereas traditional news outlets such as newsprint and television are finite as a result of space and time constraints, the Internet offers unlimited space in which new forms of media can be free to explore new topics. In the past, women's groups (as well as movements representing other marginalized sectors of society) struggled against more socially accepted news topics for the attention of the mainstream media. Now, YouTube and other online news sources enable a variety of news outlets to cover a limitless array of topics, including the activities of the *comedores'* members and other women fighting for female empowerment. Primarily, the recent YouTube videos and online news articles that explore the politicization of the community kitchens have focused on two expressions of the *comedores'* non-economic, ideological activities: mass mobilization of the kitchen members around issues that affect women and activities offered by the kitchens that promote female emancipation.

Public marches and other mass mobilizations have long been an important aspect of the *comedores*, but the added publicity of new media outlets affords greater visibility to both the marches and the motivations behind them. This brings the feminist efforts of the kitchen members out of the kitchens and into the streets, in the public eye. For example, a 2008 article published online by the Christian Science Monitor profiled a few of Lima's *comedores* and described a large demonstration from earlier that year.³⁴ In April of 2008, over 8,000 women marched in protest of the government's threats to reduce subsidies for the kitchens,³⁵ illustrating the volunteers' eagerness to participate in politicized actions as a result of their ties to the *comedores*. Thousands of women marched through the streets—banging pots and pans while

³⁴ Sara Miller Llana, "Peru's Women Unite in Kitchen—and Beyond," *Christian Science Monitor*, July 29, 2008, <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Americas/2008/0729/p01s01-woam.html>.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

shouting their slogans—in a stunning public display of female empowerment. The march itself brought the kitchens’ political goals into public view, and the news coverage of the march amplified that effect.

A similar scenario took place the next year when the news provider *Enlace Nacional* posted a YouTube video to their online channel in order to address the kitchens’ handling of renewed government threats to cut subsidies. The video shows the president of FEMOCCPAALM (the umbrella organization for Lima’s *comedores*) publically speaking out against the government plans to cut the subsidies once again.³⁶ During the video, the news anchor gave President María Bozeta the opportunity to speak to a wide audience, including both people in Peru and foreigners as well. Bozeta used the publicity as an opportunity to send two very important messages. First, the women who march and protest on behalf of the *comedores* fully understand the origins of the food distribution issues and the government’s unwillingness to accept responsibility for the shortcomings of the system. Second, and more importantly, Bozeta’s YouTube appearance illustrates that the media has taken notice of women involved in the struggle for gender equality and their efforts to both publicize and politicize the non-food-related activities associated with the kitchens.

The online new media outlets also have called much attention to even the private activities of the *comedores* that aim to further their political and ideological agendas.³⁷ Kim-Jenna Jurriaans of the Huiarou Commission explains how the work of these women promotes the

³⁶ Enlace Nacional, *Dirigentas de Comedores Populares De Lima Critican Posible Reducción de Subsidios*, YouTube, 1:48, June 17, 2009.

³⁷ For this particular situation, I characterize the actions as “private” merely to differentiate them from the very public and visible street marches. Although the actions that I will discuss in this section do take place behind closed doors, they nevertheless afford members the tools necessary to take their political agendas into the public sphere.

ideals of Millennium Development Goal Three, gender equality.³⁸ For example, in one particular *comedor*, members received training to serve as “*promotoras de derechos*” within their community, providing important information about healthcare and education to friends and neighbors.³⁹ Additionally, the actions of the women continue to echo the ideals of the 1987 CELATS handbook by promoting “peer learning and collective problem-solving.”⁴⁰ Also reminiscent of the non-economic benefits described in the handbook are the empowering concepts of collective action, self-esteem, and specialized training. While one article praises recent “marketing, leadership, and nutrition workshops,”⁴¹ another from a Peruvian news outlet mentions how the kitchens have always addressed issues outside of the basic need of food.⁴² From management workshops to thousand-woman marches, the stories covered by these new media reports provide ample evidence for the ways in which the women of Lima have been empowered to reassess their roles as females, a direct result of their work with the *comedores*.

The Shortcomings of the Western Lens

Despite all evidence to the contrary—the CELATS handbook, testimony from within Peru, YouTube videos, and online news articles—Western-oriented feminists continued to

³⁸ Kim-Jenna Jurriaans, “From Ladles to Leadership: CONAMOVIDI’s Story of Success in the MGD3 Initiative,” *www.huairou.org*, October 15, 2010, <http://www.huairou.org/from-ladles-leadership-conamovidis-story-success>. The Huairou Commission partners with grass-roots women’s organizations in the developing world in order to build capacity and facilitate the reaching of their goals.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Miller Llana, “Peru’s Women Unite.”

⁴² “Comedores Populares Planean Propuestas al Poder Ejecutivo y el Gobierno Local,” *www.LimaNorte.com*, October 27, 2011, <http://limanorte.wordpress.com/2011/10/27/comedores-populares-plantean-propuestas-al-poder-ejecutivo-y-el-gobierno-local/>. This article mentions that, “desde su fundación se ha impulsado la formación de promotoras de salud, conciliadoras extrajudiciales; promotoras en la prevención de la violencia familiar y sexual.” Thus, this internal news sources attributes projects that go well beyond survival to the *comedores* from their outset.

criticize and devalue the actions of the *comedores*. Feminist scholars such as Maruja Barrig and Luiba Kogan criticize the kitchen operations for misguided actions and allegedly failing to fully understand or realize their potential as female agents of change. Perhaps these critics expected the women of Lima to fight for equal access to education, equal pay, or more women in the government. However, without food in their families' stomachs, even Western-oriented feminists would find it difficult to seek drastic, systemic change for gender equality. Ultimately, the most important charges brought against the *comedores* by the traditional feminists become largely incorrect or irrelevant given a consideration of the specific local context of Lima, Peru.

The principal feminist critique of the *comedores* is that the women who work in the kitchens seem to be more concerned with daily, concrete and immediate needs (basic needs, such as food, fuel, and clean water) rather than female liberation from traditional positions of subordination and oppression. Barrig asserts that the women neither understand nor develop "their potential as citizens or as dynamic agents of change."⁴³ The critics argue that by remaining in the kitchens, continuing their gender-assigned roles of maternity and general caretaking, the women do more harm to the feminist movement than good—the women contribute little to fostering "a new awareness of women's gender identity."⁴⁴ However, Barrig and the other critics are quick to gloss over the documented progress for women that has transpired as a direct result of the *comedores'* activities. The critics argue that the kitchens address the wrong problem by working with the symptoms rather than the root of issues and focusing on practical needs over

⁴³ Maruja Barrig, "The Difficult Equilibrium between Bread and Roses: Women's Organizations and the Transition from Dictatorship to Democracy in Peru," in *The Women's Movement in Latin America: Feminism and the Transition to Democracy*, ed. Jane Jaquette (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 119.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

ideological ones when it comes to the feminist cause. I argue that the critics are looking at the wrong problem by not accounting for local conditions when examining the kitchens.

The historical trajectory of Lima's *comedores populares*—their economic yet ideological origins, their perseverance despite widespread feminist critiques, and their more public politicization of recent years—serves as a prime example of the ways in which traditional,⁴⁵ Western frameworks for assessing women's actions do not accurately describe feminist activity within the Latin American context. As the communal kitchen organizations indicate, addressing practical needs—feeding families and neighbors—serves as a vehicle through which women gain personal agency and empowerment, regardless of the fact that they continue in their traditional gender-specific roles of cooking. Far from frittering the day away in the kitchen (as most women heads of households do on a daily basis if they are not members of a kitchen), members of the *comedores* go out into the communities and streets, making their voices heard in order to improve gender equality in Peru. In light of looking at feminist action in a distinctively Latin American context, Barrig's three main criticisms—that the *comedores* address the symptoms instead of the root of the food security question and that the women prioritize practical matters over strategic ones—become unproblematic. Rather, the activities of the *comedores'* members clearly fit into the new conception of Latin American feminism which Cosgrove succinctly defines as creating “new social constructions for what it means to be Latin American women” by “transforming how women are treated, perceived, and included.”⁴⁶ It is through effectively targeting the treatment, perceptions, and inclusion of women that the *comedores* challenge systemic inequalities and therefore represent the Latin American feminist movement.

⁴⁵ Here, I refer to the aforementioned practical/strategic, private/public and feminine/feminist dichotomies.

⁴⁶ Cosgrove, *Leadership from the Margins*, 6.

In each of those three areas, the activities of the *comedores* promote female empowerment and emancipation. As for the question of the inclusion of women, members of the community kitchens enjoy greatly expanded interactions outside of the home. They organize bulk purchases of foodstuffs through vendors, interact with state officials and representatives, and even communicate with mass audiences via media interviews designed to publicize their grievances, goals, and activities. Participation with the kitchens also alters the ways in which women are perceived both by themselves and by their communities. In many cases, women experience a significant increase in self-respect, -worth, -esteem, and -confidence. Moreover, since they are serving the larger community in addition to their families, they become even more useful and valuable members of society. Soon, the rest of the community perceives these changes and begins to offer the women “recognition and respect from their motherhood role and from the activities that constitute a kind of ‘informal citizenship,’ which as in the case of the *comedores* takes their domestic activities from the isolation of the family to public spaces.”⁴⁷ In this sense, the members of the *comedores* satisfy even the traditional feminist distinction of public activity over private action. Finally, as for the treatment of women, the YouTube video of the president of FEMOCCPAALM and the news articles about the kitchens’ activities illustrate that the media is interested and willing to both listen to and broadcast what these women have to say. The ways in which the *comedores* address the inclusion, perception, and treatment of women illustrate their contributions to constructing new ideas of feminism and a Latin American feminist movement.

Conclusions

During their decades of existence, the *comedores populares* of Lima evolved from survival organizations to public, politicized entities that fought for the empowerment of women despite criticisms that their actions contributed little to the feminist movement. At each of these

⁴⁷ Molyneux, “Change and Continuity,” 41.

phases, in various ways, the women, the kitchens, and their associated activities have challenged unequal social constructions. In the beginning, they rejected the idea that women should endure a state of economic inferiority relative to their male counterparts. Through their ideological foundations, the kitchens rebuffed their categorization as simply providers of food and rose to meet the non-economic needs of women, empowering them in new ways. When the feminist critics attacked their contributions to Peruvian feminism, the women of the kitchens toiled on, recognizing the value of their work both for themselves and for their communities. Now, as publically politicized entities, the *comedores* call for government accountability. Throughout their evolution, the kitchens have provided a space in which women “challenge oppressive gender roles”⁴⁸ and seek innovative ways to elevate the women of Peru.

Ultimately, the critics of the *comedores* must begin to evaluate these organizations from a local perspective in order to fully understand their contributions to female emancipation and empowerment in Peru. At best, using a Western lens to interpret the ideology and actions of the *comedores* represents a misunderstanding. At worst, this misunderstanding results in a lost opportunity to capitalize on the existing structures and successes of the community kitchens and similar grassroots organizations. Entities such as the *comedores* should play a valuable role in defining and pursuing the feminist agenda within Peru. Rather than attempt to force a foreign model onto the Latin American setting, the Western-oriented feminist critics of the community kitchens must look for the value in utilizing local definitions of feminism in order to pursue locally and culturally relevant forms of female emancipation, empowerment, and equality.

⁴⁸ Cosgrove, *Leadership from the Margins*, 12.

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