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The Empowerment of Women through
a Community Designed Project:
A Community Kitchen in Peru

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Introduction

In families where men are the sole or major sources of earned incomes, women's empowerment is often limited. As women earn their own resources, they often have a greater voice within family and community affairs. However when there are high rates of under-employment, women are those least able to obtain work, both due to restrictions on the types of jobs deemed suitable, as well as restrictions on their job options due to childcare responsibilities. Under such conditions, are there other mechanisms by which women can become more empowered?

This paper discusses the impact of a community based project on women's lives, and suggests that by enhancing women's leadership skills, such projects may lead to empowerment of women. Peru represents an extreme case where due to economic instability and large external debts, economic empowerment of both women and men is limited. Inflation rates in Peru rose from an average of less than 114% in 1987 to 1700% in 1988; the estimated inflation rate for 1989 is projected at over 10,000%.

Community kitchens have developed in Peru over the last 10 years, in part as a response to the economic crisis. There are currently estimated to be over 800-1300 community kitchens (comedores comunales or comedores populares). Because community

kitchens are generally developed and run by women, they provide a case in which the impact of community projects on women's empowerment can be examined.

The Community Kitchen in Chosica

Chosica, (a pseudonym) is a small shanty town outside of Lima in the area of Ate-Vitarte, an industrial section of the city. There is no electricity, running water, school or health facilities, and the precarious housing is built from straw mats. The majority of the inhabitants of Chosica were peacefully living in a traditional peasant community in the Andean Sierra, four hours by horseback from the nearest town until 1984. Then terrorist raids began and after several months of suffering and death, families began to leave. Community leaders at a town meeting appealed to the young people and families to migrate together.

By 1985 many families had come to Lima, living with relatives or dispersed throughout the city. These families met regularly at a local parish, and subsequently decided to obtain legal status and apply for land from the local mayor. In December, 1986 40 families occupied a small plot of desert at the edge of a barren hill.

By 1987, there were over 80 families living in Chosica. By

sharing resources and labor, on week-ends men and women worked together building their huts and communal buildings, including a latrine, health post, and community kitchen. While young men looked for jobs at nearby factories, mothers who could not leave their homes because of child care responsibilities, began to discuss how they could help themselves and their communities within this context of a new and difficult situation. A community promotor working with the local parish, helped them organize a comedor communal. A large stove and pots were donated by the Town Council and cooking oil donated by CARITAS.

The junta central (self-governing organization) of Chosica proposed the formal establishment of the comedor to the Assembly of Community Members. It was approved by the community and all families felt bound to fulfill the obligations it required. The junta is made up of male community leaders, with the assembly (including both men and women) electing a comedor committee that is made up of primarily women.

In contrast to many comedores in Lima, all families in Chosica have to fulfill turns working at the comedor, even if they do not buy the food cooked in it. This comedor is also different since it is seen as a community project, and not a women's project or a mother's club project. Additionally, the sale of rations is not limited to members of the community as it is in some other sites. However most workers at the comedor are women. This seems to be

based on the traditional division of labor where mothers generally remain home or community bound, and because it is the woman's responsibility to cook.

Organization of the Comedor

The comedor replicates the organizational structure of the junta. There is a president, vice-president and six officers who take charge of the daily tasks needed to run the comedor, except that of the buying, cooking and serving of food. The president usually makes at least two errands per week and attends numerous meetings at the Town Council and with other leaders of comedores to apply for donated foods or equipment. The woman in charge of the food pantry and the treasurer spend a few hours daily at the comedor checking food acquisitions and the accounts.

Women in the community take turns working one day every 2-3 weeks, in groups of four. The working day begins at 7 a.m., and except for a break between 3:00 and 5:00 p.m., work lasts until 10:00 p.m. Their work includes purchasing all food at the local market, preparing a mid-day meal, serving it, and cleaning up, preparing a snack of milk with oats (vaso de leche) for children around 5:00, and then reheating the mid-day meal for dinner, serving and cleaning up.

Methodology

Data used in this paper were collected in an evaluation of the comedor and its impacts on maternal and child dietary intakes, and women's activity patterns. Baseline data were collected at the early stages of the comedor, and subsequently one year later. Twenty-four hour recalls of activity patterns were collected to assess the impact of the comedor on time mothers spent in food preparation and other activities. Data on non-daily tasks were estimated based on a weekly or monthly recall and prorated on a daily basis. Participation in work at the community kitchen was reported as communal work. To assess the validity of the data, direct observations of tasks performed every half hour were done in a small number of cases to obtain estimates of ranges of time spent in various activities. Additional data were collected from depth interviews with women leaders in the community and through observation of daily routines at the comedor, at assemblies and other communal meetings. Additionally, participation in eating meals at the comedor was monitored bi-monthly.

Data on activity patterns were also collected from a nearby control community that did not have a comedor, in order to allow for comparisons. All pregnant women and those with children aged 3 years or younger were asked to participate in the evaluation. In Chosica, there were 22 and 33 respondents in April 1988 and 1989 respectively. In the control village, because of

difficulties in maintaining close relations in a community where there was no intervention (combined with high levels of terrorist activity), the number of interviews decreased from 25 to 13 for the same period. The following analyses are conducted on only those women who were included at both interviews (20 and 13 women in Chosica and Control). Five women in Chosica were defined as community leaders (working on the comedor or vaso de leche program), 5 were workers (full or part-time) and 10 housewives. There were no women community leaders in the Control village, and 4 were workers and 9 housewives.

Impact of the Comedor on Women

Role in Leadership Formation

While the community junta is comprised of men, members of the executive committee of the comedor consists of both men and women. Some of the male members also serve on the junta. Though women are still not involved directly in the directing council of the community, they are the ones responsible to the junta. This role has raised the power of women within the community, as they now must speak at meetings, present information and lead discussions on issues pertaining to the comedor. All main decisions on the comedor are made at general assembly meetings. The comedor has thus led to an increase in leadership skills of

several women in the community members and an increased voice in the operation of the community and its activities.

Women's Working Days

The duration of the average woman's day is quite long in both communities, and has increased over the year as the economic crisis made their home situations more precarious. Work hours were defined as all hours in which childcare, household production or income production occurred. This did not include time spent resting, chatting with friends, or sleeping. Women worked on average 13.3 hours in April 1988 compared to 14.2 hours in 1989. The longest work day was experienced by workers (part or full time), next by leaders and the least by housewives. Though the numbers of women included are small, the tendency for this pattern to exist is evident in both Chosica and the Control (Table 1).

Women with higher numbers of children had longer work days, as shown in Table 2 for Chosica. Because of the fewer number of women in the Control, the data are not presented, though the trends were similar.

Table 1
Average number of Working Hours for Women
by Occupation

Community	April 1988	April 1989
Chosica		
Workers	16.15	15.50
Leaders	13.45	14.10
Housewives	12.15	13.50
Control		
Workers	13.30	14.15
Housewives	13.30	14.20

Table 2
Average Number of working hours
By the number of children in family

Number of children	April 1988	April 1989
1 child	13.0*	13.2
2-3 children	12.3	13.5
4-5 children	14.3	15.0
6-8 children	15.0	15.0

* This figure includes the 2 full time workers, and since they have longer working shifts, their presence in this group raises the average value.

Time Spent in Food Preparation

The time spent in food preparation includes several components:

- *Food and fuel purchase
- *Food processing (cutting, peeling, etc)
- *Cooking
- *Serving
- *Clearing and washing dishes
- *Gathering water

Table 3 illustrates that women spent on average 3 to 3.5 hours on food related tasks at home (not including time spent cooking at the comedor).

Factors that affect the time spent in food preparation include the distance between the family's hut and the water tap. Cash availability can affect whether women will need to walk daily the two km to the market, or whether they can make large purchases ahead of time. On the other hand, the poorest families with small amounts of cash that can only make small daily purchases, may deem it more efficient to pay higher prices at the local stores.

Table 3
Time Spent in Food Related Tasks
(Hours)

Community	April 1988	April 1989.
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Chosica		
Min.	1.5*	1.2
Max.	9.3	7.1
Mean	3.4	3.2
Control		
Min.	.1*	1.3
Max.	6.4	6.4
Mean	3.3	3.3

*One women in Chosica works preparing food as a street vendor, and cooks for her family at the same time. One family in the control reported never eating at home in April 1988.

Impact of the Comedor on Food Preparation in the Home

Table 4 illustrates that over the year during which the comedor became well functioning, the time spent on food preparation decreased. Because travel to make food purchases or obtain water complicates the analysis as described above, the following section only compares time spent in the other food related tasks. This table reports only the proportion of time spent out of the total working day, but the absolute time shows a similar pattern. The percent of time spent in food preparation decreased in Chosica, but remained fairly constant in the Control.

Workers and leaders spend less time to prepare and serve food at home. Workers reported eating at their work places, and leaders used the comedor most frequently. Women in Chosica appeared to decrease the amount of time spent in food preparation over the year, while those in the Control had similar percentages at both times. This suggests that the existence of the comedor may have helped at least some women in Chosica reduce the time spent in food preparation overall.

Table 5 gives the average percent of time in food preparation by the frequency of use of the comedor. As illustrated, those women who used the comedor the most (those with longer working days), spent less time in food preparation at home. The comedor thus has helped some women cope with the task of being community

Table 4

Percent of Working Hours spent in Food Preparation

By Occupation and Number of Children

Community	Occupation	April 1988	April 1989
Chosica	All	19.2	13.7
	Workers	9.5	6.8
	Leaders	16.0	14.3
	Housewives	25.8	18.3
Control	All	16.9	17.1
	Workers	16.4	15.0
	Housewives	17.0	17.8
Chosica	No. of Children		
	1 child	12.5	12.6
	2-3 children	21.0	14.0
	4-5 children	19.5	12.5
	6-8 children	26.3	18.3
Control	1 child	14.5	-
	2-3 children	18.7	18.5
	4-5 children	20.0	17.0
	6-8 children	12.3	16.8

leaders and caring for family feeding needs as well.

However on a daily basis, most women in Chosica continued to cook to some extent even if they purchased rations at the comedor. Especially earlier in the year, about two-thirds of mothers continued cooking at home even on days they purchased food at the comedor. By April, 1989, 40% of mothers cooked at home when they purchased foods at the comedor. This decrease may be related to cost savings that the comedor represented during worsening economic conditions at this point in time, or it may represent more satisfaction with the comedor, or greater demands on women's time.

Organization and Women: Another Constraint On Their Time

Besides helping cooking and serving once every two weeks, the women in Chosica have to attend a weekly meeting where matters concerning the comedor are discussed. The meeting, called Comedor Assembly, usually lasts two hours. For special tasks, such as repairing the kitchen or doing some legal proceedings to get donated food, committees are named at these meetings, entailing additional work during the week.

Table 5
Percent of Time Spent in Food Preparation
By Frequency of Use of Comedor

Days per Week	April 1988	April 1989
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0-4 times	20.2-27.0%	14.3-14.8%
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5-7 times	8.5-12.0%	8.5-11.55
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The women who work the most are the leaders. Some of them have to spend many days visiting organizations and attending external meetings in order to obtain donated foods. Others, who supervise the daily service or do the accounting, have to go every day to the comedor and spend a couple of hours there.

Since quantitative methods do not easily describe the daily life of women in Chosica. We decided to illustrate three cases histories of active leaders within the community.

U.C. was president of the comedor in April 1988. She has 7 children and worked 18 hours a day. She only spent 4% of that time preparing food to complement the comedor's rations, which she bought daily but not in enough numbers to feed her large family. Although the price was very cheap she could not afford it. In April 1989 she was no longer the President nor a formal leader, but she still worked 16 hours a day, after taking care of the organization and matters of the comedor. She spent 19% of such time preparing food. At that time, she fed her whole family with 3 rations a day.

Her oldest daughter, M.G., a single mother of one, lived by herself and, in April 1988, was also a leader in charge of the "Vaso de Leche" program (milk program). Her working day lasted 14 hours, with 21% of her time dedicated to food preparation. She bought rations only once a week and also cooked other food on

such days, mainly for her baby. In April 1989 she was no longer a leader but had two part time jobs, one as a street vendor in the local marketplace, 2 Km. distance away. Her working hours added up to 16 hours but she only spent 4% of her time preparing food as she could now eat daily at the comedor. She prepared no extra food on such occasions, except for the baby's milk and breakfast.

M.S. is a young, intelligent and literate woman. She was first nominated by her community to be trained in first aid and self-help health basics, so she became the "promotora de salud" of her community. She was in charge of their first-aid kit and of helping coordinate vaccine campaigns. She also was elected as treasurer of the comedor. As such she worked daily for 18.30 hours, the longest working day registered in April 1988. She used to go very early to give out the money for food purchases. Her day ended up at 10 p.m., by doing the accounts. Only 9% of her time was dedicated to prepare food. She had three young children and shortly after April became pregnant. She bought rations from the comedor daily but she had to cook extra food at home because often she considered the menus not to be appropriate for her little children. Her fourth baby was born in April 1989. She was no longer the comedor's treasurer but was still in charge of the community health kit and campaigns. Her daily working hours had decreased to 14.3 hours, 14% of which she spent preparing food. She bought rations from the comedor four times a

week but still had to prepare extra food for her babies.

These individual case histories illustrate similar patterns as the overall analyses. Leaders spend a large amount of time in communal activities and the comedor has helped them to do so by reducing the time spent in food preparation at home.

Conclusion

The comedor in Chosica definitely led to increases in the time women spent in communal work. For each family, an added 15 hours every two to three weeks, means that for the woman from the family who participated, it added on average 1 hour to her normal working day. For women who became leaders in the comedor organization, the work load was an additional 1-2 hours per day.

Because women spend a large amount of time in food preparation, on average 3.5 hours per day, the comedor could represent a substantial savings in the time women spend in food preparation. This however seemed to be a time savings for primarily for those women who worked outside the community or those who were leaders. A high proportion of women continued to cook in their homes even when they purchased meals at the kitchen. This was often the case because they felt it necessary to cook different foods for their children.

While putting greater demands on women's time, the comedor also offered an opportunity for women within the community to work together and to gain status within the community. Since the comedor was considered a high priority for the community, and helped to earn income needed for other community activities (school equipment, improvements in water supplies, legal documents, etc), work in the comedor was valued by men as well as women.

The organizational skills obtained especially by the comedor leaders are valued by the women and have led to increased activities considered as priorities by women in the community, including the development of a weaning food program to reduce malnutrition among community children, and the organization of a community school for pre-school children. Continued monitoring of this project will illustrate longer term impacts on the empowerment of women in the community.