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A Feminist Examination of Community Kitchens in Peru and Bolivia

Kathleen Schroeder

Abstract

Community kitchens in the Andean countries of Peru and Bolivia are complex spaces with the potential to empower and subjugate women. This article is based on 15 years experience working on issues of gender and development in the Andes and includes information from participant observation and discussions with development workers. It concludes that the neo-liberal agenda benefits from community kitchens because it allows the state to abdicate its responsibility to the poor.

Introduction

Kitchens are universal and configured in a wide variety of ways. In the western world, we usually think of kitchens as private spaces but public, or community kitchens, are common in many low-income countries. In the Andean countries of Peru and Bolivia, community kitchens tap into women's unpaid kitchen labor and have become a vital part of many families' strategies for surviving economic crisis. Soup kitchens, or community kitchens, in Peru and Bolivia have received a great deal of scholarly attention in the development literature and they provide an excellent example of how kitchens can be spaces of both women's autonomy and women's oppression. Community kitchens in the Andes are both public and private spaces. They are ostensibly open to all, but usually run by a fairly small group of powerful women. They are showcases of women's entrepreneurial abilities and an indication that the state has abdicated its responsibility to the poor as it adopts neo-liberal policies. This essay will examine communal soup kitchens in the Andean countries of Peru and Bolivia to demonstrate the complexities of these spaces and their potential to empower and subjugate women.

A Note on Methods

I have been interested in kitchens in the Andes since my first fieldwork experience in the 1980s in Peru (Schroeder, 1990). Since that time, I have kept my hands in the kitchen both figuratively and literally. During dissertation research in marginal barrios in Bolivia in

1993, I spent a great deal of time as a participant observer in community kitchens. Since 1993, I have continued to be involved with soup kitchen research on repeated trips to both Bolivia and Peru, including four months living in Bolivia in 2005. My comments here are based on 15 years of observation and are supported by the current literature, discussions with development experts and participant observation with women in community kitchens.

Soup Kitchens in the US and how they Differ from those in Peru and Bolivia

Before I began working in soup kitchens (better described as community kitchens) in the Andes, my preconceived notion of these spaces was predicated on my experiences with similar institutions in the United States. Irene Glasser (1988) provides an excellent ethnographic portrayal of a soup kitchen in the United States, which can be contrasted with kitchens in Peru and Bolivia. In her description, soup kitchens are typically hidden. They are established in church basements or community centers and the patrons ('guests' in her language) are hidden from society's gaze. Many of the people she describes are profoundly isolated and alone in the world. Many have emotional and physical disabilities and, for them, the soup kitchen is a safe place to pass the morning hours while they wait for someone to prepare their lunch. Lunch is usually provided for free, and the patrons have no responsibility to the kitchen other than to be respectful of the space.

Community kitchens in Latin America are different places in many ways. They share the objective with US institutions of providing a nutritious meal to economically disadvantaged people. They also share the characteristic of being safe places where people can meet. A major difference, however, is that in Latin America these places are not hidden. They have prominent places in communities and are usually a source of civic pride. Many different types of community kitchens exist in Latin America. Some are run by the state, but many more are considered autonomous, or self-help, establishments. In an autonomous community kitchen, the women running the program also receive the food. Officials from donor agencies may provide some guidance and oversight, but on a daily basis the women are in charge. These types of kitchens in particular have been lauded as training grounds for entrepreneurial women in Latin America. Women who learn the skills needed to run a community kitchen, it is argued, can apply those skills in other settings.

One very telling difference between Latin American and US soup kitchens is that in Latin America politicians visit community kitchens looking for votes. Community kitchens are places where community formation and consolidation can happen, and politicians are quick to seize the opportunity to address this important constituency. During any given election cycle, political leaders from a variety of parties will court the community kitchen vote. Politicians understand the power of these women as community activists and will aim their political stump speeches towards wooing these voters.

Finally, community kitchens in Latin America just feel different from those in the US. These are not places where people pass the time because they have nothing to do. The women there are not bored and lonely. They are very likely to be community leaders. The

women participating in community kitchens are frequently the best connected and most involved in community activities. Significantly, these are the same women whom Moser (1992) discussed as facing a 'triple role' because of their responsibilities to their families, employers and projects sponsored by well-meaning non-governmental organizations.

Kitchens, Hygiene and the Neo-liberal Agenda

Community kitchens are depicted as spaces where women's empowerment is nurtured and women can find their voices for the first time (Mujica, 1994). Women of indigenous origin are frequently associated with the community kitchen model of economic and social empowerment. However, during times of economic crisis women of all ethnic backgrounds in Peru and Bolivia have relied upon community kitchens. UNICEF has been an important funder and supporter of community kitchens and their literature makes a link between community kitchens and women's empowerment (UNICEF, 2004). Development experts argue that women can learn community organization skills, nutrition, and hygiene and at the same time provide an inexpensive meal for their families. The Catholic organization, Sisters of the Holy Cross, shares this commitment to community kitchens and has taken its work a step further by also establishing 'tambos', or stores, where community kitchens can purchase supplies. They are helping women to broaden their skills by providing training in wholesale and retail store management (CSCSISTERS, 2004).

A training manual on the organization and function of community kitchens (CECYCAP, 1989) reads more as a primer on participatory democracy than a guide for cooking for large numbers of people. Clearly, the kitchens are viewed as places where women's capacity is built and women become more empowered. The kitchen is only the starting place to gain access to these women and teach them about hygiene, health, and the importance of literacy. Community kitchens can serve a wide variety of functions by simply providing a space for women to come together and conduct socially sanctioned gendered activities such as cooking.

During the off hours, these same buildings can house meetings of Mother's Clubs. In Peru and Bolivia, Mother's Clubs are popular organizations that bring women together to address issues of special concern to women. The issues can and will vary according to the needs of the group. Participants in Clubs might learn about child development, or participate in a literacy program, or engage in an income-generating activity. These weekly meetings always have an objective, but often the meetings become focused on other issues that concern the women. The women can get sidetracked and end up discussing a situation where a woman in the community is facing domestic violence or debating the progress of a community water project. Frequently, women exchange information about the retail prices of different foods or products. This informal networking provides support and concrete information that women can use to better their material wellbeing.

Feminist scholars working in the Andes have outlined the dialectic between the empowerment of women and the control of women as demonstrated in various

improvement projects sponsored by the state and non-governmental organizations. For example, Stephenson (1999) examines the formation of the modern state in Bolivia and its explicit prioritization of indigenous women who, according to the state, are dirty. Improving the hygiene of the indigenous population has long been a focus of development projects. Implicit in much of the materials about community kitchens is an expectation that indigenous women were not concerned with cleanliness. Not only are indigenous women considered dirty, according to much of the literature, these women also need the basic organizational skills that running a community kitchen can provide. If indigenous women can learn to manage an efficient kitchen, this will have spillovers to other aspects of their lives. This strategy mirrors much of the post-World War II literature that tried to train women in the United States in the efficient use of kitchen resources (MATRIX, 1984).

The economic collapse of the 1980s that spawned the growth of community kitchens (particularly in Peru) has been well documented (Blondet & Montero, 1995; Boggio et al., 1990; Kogan, 1998; PRODIA, 1989). The growth of community kitchens emerged from the social and economic morass of the 1980s in Latin America. Women could survive economic crisis by binding together in a shared strategy of community labor. By pooling resources, women could buy food in bulk, thereby saving money. As the state and non-governmental organizations began to grasp the power of the kitchens, they started to help out through food subsidies or donations. The community kitchen model flourished and was even promoted as an opportunity for women's empowerment. Women's daily struggle to feed themselves and their families is repackaged as a wonderful opportunity that benefits women.

Hays-Mitchell (2002) argues that communal kitchens are premised on the volunteer labor of women with already demanding work and family obligations. One study found that about 80% of women participating in community kitchens spent between three and eight hours a day working in those kitchens (Immink, 2001). In addition to the hours spent shopping, cooking and cleaning up, women active in community kitchens must also endure an endless number of meetings (Mujica, 1994). These kitchens expand women's reproductive tasks, always assuming that poor women have an endless supply of time and energy.

Agents of Change?

For all the discussion of community kitchens as places where women gain valuable experience, what evidence exists that women active in soup kitchens can actually transfer these skills into income generation? Although the health, status and living conditions of families that participate in community kitchens has been documented (Fernandez et al., 1994) the long term effects of participation remain questionable. It appears that autonomous kitchens (ones not run by the state) are most likely to foster women's empowerment (Lenten, 1993), but no compelling evidence exists that women in fact can use the organizational skills they gain through their unpaid kitchen labor to substantially increase their earnings.

Women spend considerable time and energy in these enterprises and have very little to

show for it but a cheap bowl of soup. This helps to explain why 'burnout' and 'turnover' are such big issues when it comes to staffing community kitchens.

Community kitchens are not egalitarian. Women with better social connections, more supportive spouses, and other family members able to contribute reproductive labor, are much more likely to be in leadership roles in the community kitchen. Women already on the fringes of society may not feel welcome to participate, or might not be permitted to by their husbands. It is questionable if community kitchens have been effective in meeting the nutritional needs of the poorest of the poor in the Andes. If these kitchens survive over a long period of time, they can divide a community.

Community Kitchens in Peru and Bolivia

Not all poor neighborhoods have community kitchens, but those that do tend to attract other development projects. Women in the kitchens can provide the needed structure to support other community-based projects. Women's role as unpaid community monitors is reinforced. A barrio with a well-established kitchen has proven itself as a community that can work together, and is better able to assure development workers that they will live up to their end of an agreement in a project. Communities that have kitchens also attract the attention of political leaders who are always on the lookout for potential constituents.

Twelve years after conducting research in a marginal barrio in Bolivia and acting as a participant observer in a soup kitchen established there, I was able to return in 2005. Although the kitchen no longer operates, the women who were in charge of its daily operation continue their involvement in the neighborhood. Over the years, development projects and funding from international agencies has come and gone. They have had medical clinics established and disappeared, training sessions for women's income generation, dietary supplement programs for children and most recently a project that provides academic tutoring and after-school care for barrio children. The projects and funding sources have changed, but the key neighborhood players have not. The same core group of women has been involved in every project. This neighborhood has a reputation with development workers as a likely place for success, because of the involvement of certain key women.

Implications: Self-help and the abandonment of the poor

Community kitchens are the perfect neo-liberal tool. They ostensibly teach indigenous women skills that are useful in a capitalist economic system such as entrepreneurial skills and record keeping and they allow the state to abdicate its responsibility to the poor (Gill, 2000). Women who are struggling to feed their families benefit by learning basic accounting and time management skills. If hard-working women can rally and manage to feed their families under even the most adverse economic situations, the state can further reduce its support for the poor. Community kitchens in the Andes emerged in the 1980s during a time of profound economic and social crises. Since that time, community kitchens have received substantial scholarly attention and are now a common feature of development plans. Although substantial benefits to particular women can be traced to

their involvement in community kitchens, their long-term benefits for most women are questionable.

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