Collective Action, Gender and Ethnicity in Peru: a case study of the People's Kitchens

Rosemary Thorp

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Abstract
Collective action among indigenous and '*chola*' women is studied through the phenomenon of the '*Comedores Populares*', or People's Kitchens. The paper asks how and how far the usual barriers to collective action are overcome, and explores whether the groups can move from survival activities to a 'strategic' agenda. The paper analyses the obstacles to achieving successful outcomes.

The author
Rosemary Thorp is CRISE Senior Researcher in charge of the Latin America programme.

Email: RsmryThorp@aol.com

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People's Kitchens[1]

By Rosemary Thorp

This paper reports on a case study of women's collective action, as a means of exploring the intertwining of gender, ethnicity and poverty in the phenomenon of collective action among marginalised groups. The study was undertaken as part of a wider project examining the role of collective action – or its absence or weakness – as a possible partial explanation of the persistence of inequality, particularly inequality between groups, or 'horizontal' inequalities (HI).[2] Its principal focus was not gender; however, gender is an important dimension of inequality, and comes intertwined with other aspects of inequality, in particular ethnicity and poverty. I first explain a little of the nature of the issue of ethnicity in Peru. I next explain the framework of the collective action studies and the meaning I give to 'success' (Section 2). In the third section I present our case study, as an instance of collective action within that framework. The fourth section concludes, suggesting some preliminary ideas on the relevance of multiple exclusions to the persistence of HIs and the rigidities of a hierarchical society, as a stimulus to further research.

1. Ethnicity, Collective Action and Gender in Peru

The case study reported here forms part of an international research project led from Oxford University exploring the dynamics of inequality between groups, including the relationship of those dynamics both to political violence and to more constructive forms of collective action. The research contrasts such relationships across cases in Africa, Asia and Latin America. In the context of that wider study, we are interested in why deep inequality has persisted for so long in Peru, and in exploring the relationship between inequality between groups and political violence. One aspect of embeddedness might be that the incentives and capacity for non-violent collective action, and/or the chances of its ultimate success, may be weakened by the very process of exclusion – a vicious circle indeed. We have been interested in examples of collective action which in principle might remedy inequalities, particularly inequalities between groups. Earlier studies in the project explored how far it was lack of identity, leading to a weak propensity to collective action, that explained lack of success in changing the power relations of Peru. In that work we presented findings that in fact demonstrated a *vigorous* propensity to collective action at the community level in most cases.[3] Instead, our evidence showed that the 'blocks' were the nature of local politics (divisive and prone to corruption), and the failure at national and regional level to provide the necessary macro-micro links.

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[1] Discussions with Corinne Caumartin, Maxine Molyneux, Frances Stewart and Maritza Paredes have been stimulating and fruitful in the work for this paper. They bear no responsibility for the outcome. The paper draws on much collaborative work with Maritza Paredes and Ismael Muñoz.

[2] See Stewart (2008). The term distinguishes inequalities between groups from that between individuals, or 'vertical' inequality.

[3] As part of the Peruvian case, we reported in an earlier paper on four studies of community-level collective action (none of them of women's groups). See Munoz, Paredes and Thorp (2006). Three were in the high Andes, the Sierra of Peru (Huanta in Ayacucho, Espinar in Cuzco, and Bambamarca in Cajamarca). The fourth was in a Lima *barriada* (slum) – San Juan de Lurigancho.

It is important to note that in the earlier work, we found an absence of ethnic self-awareness as a *mobilising* factor for group action. This does not mean, however, that ethnicity is not important. On the contrary, in Peru it is extremely important. First, it is important as an explanation of marginality over the long term, as a result of historical processes of discrimination and exclusion. We have shown this in our historical research[4], which demonstrates the consequences of an economic model centred on the Coast, and a political-social model centred on Lima, interacting with and consolidating a system where the indigenous population of the Sierra is not needed, except as a supplier of labour to the mines and to the Coast. Second, a common history and shared ethnic origin provide a sense of unity, despite the existence of many sub-groups within what today is known as the 'indigenous' population. As a unifying factor ethnicity is there, overlapping with poverty and class (Caumartin, Gray Molina and Thorp 2008; Paredes 2008).[5]

Another finding which has emerged from the wider study is the overlap between different types of group inequalities. Groups defined in ethnic/cultural terms reveal significant inter-group inequalities.[6] But within that inequality, there is a further gender inequality, particularly in respect of education. A quarter of indigenous women are illiterate and only one-third have reached secondary level. Knowing what we do about the externalities attached to women's education, this is a serious feature of the embeddedness of inequality. Issues of human rights apart, it is well known that educating women – even to primary level – has beneficial effects on family health and on the education of the next generation.[7]

Table 1 summarises the way we have attempted to measure this double disadvantage: in Peru, indigenous women have less education than indigenous men, and this gap is greater than that between non-indigenous men and women. The HI for mean years of schooling is .74 for indigenous men and .55 for indigenous women (2002 data).[8]

In our earlier case studies, we also noted how small a role women played in leadership or organisational terms in the various instances of collective action among indigenous-origin groups. This was hardly a surprise, but the fact led us to ask whether the 'double disadvantage' implied in being an indigenous woman was of any relevance to the failure of collective action to change the persistent HIs we were encountering.

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[4] See the historical chapters co-authored by Carlos Contreras, Maritza Paredes and Rosemary Thorp, Chapters 5-8, in Thorp and Paredes (forthcoming). See also Caumartin, Gray Molina and Thorp (2008).

[5] Throughout our writing, we acknowledge that there are many different ethnicities within the constructed 'indigenous' ethnicity of today. But a sense of 'Andean', 'quechua' and/or 'indigenous' origin is patently there today.

[6] This statement is expanded on and supported in working papers for the project by Figueroa and Barron (2005) and Paredes (2008). In both papers the authors attempt to tackle the complexity of identity, which is of course multiple and overlapping. They also explain how we handle defining ethnicity in the project. In a hierarchical world such as Peru, ethnic identity is typically suppressed. Society's attitudes and prejudices may affect both how we see ourselves and how we try to be seen by others.

[7] See Frost et al. (2005) for an authoritative survey.

[8] Table 1 uses the pragmatic solution to the problem of defining and measuring ethnicity in Peru that Figueroa and Barron have developed (2005). As they explain, the problem arises because language spoken is a poor indicator of ethnicity in Peru, and self identification is neither readily available nor reliable in a society where ethnicity is suppressed and discrimination rife.

However, a serious investigation of the phenomenon of double disadvantage, and further, double discrimination, was beyond our scope, requiring as it does the tools of psychology and anthropology. So the focus of this paper remains collective action. However, we deliberately chose as an example an outstanding instance of collective action among indigenous-origin women, the '*comedores populares*' or people's kitchens, with the intention of at least raising questions as to the possible relevance of gender to the obstacles to collective action in a hierarchical society such as Peru. Our fieldwork was done only in Lima for this case study, where the members of the *comedores* were in the 1980s largely first-generation migrants from the Sierra, and by the 1990s increasingly second-generation migrants, self identifying as *chola*[9] or *mestiza,* though sometimes as indigenous. The analysis is as a result quite complex, since the indigenous-origin population of Lima may have *both* a sense of indigenous-Andean roots *and* a sense of rising 'above' their rural, less-educated kinsmen and women whom they have left behind. The contradictions of ethnicity in urban Peru should never be interpreted as the unimportance of ethnicity.

The phenomenon of the kitchens is country-wide, and we hope a future study can explore beyond Lima. In the Sierra provinces, the members of kitchens are principally indigenous, in self-concept and in terms of our criterion of ethnicity (place of birth). But the Lima group is particularly interesting, since it represents the group probably most actively challenging the rigidities of Peruvian society.

Table 1: Peru – Horizontal Inequalities (HIs) in education incorporating gender dimension (a)

	Mean years of schooling 25+	Literacy rate 15+	% with secondary ed or more 25+
a. All	8.0	88.1	53.9
b. Non-indigenous: All	10.6	97.0	80.0
c. Male	11.1	98.3	83.8
d. Female	10.3	95.7	76.7
e. Indigenous: All	6.8	83.9	42.8
f. Male	7.8	91.9	50.8
g. Female	5.8	76.2	35.2
h. HI ratio: All	0.64 (b)	0.86 (c)	0.54 (d)
i. Male	0.74	0.95	0.64
j. Female	0.55	0.79	0.44
Difference k = i-j	.19	.16	.20

Source: Barron (2008), based on ENAHO household surveys
Notes:
[a] Ethnicity is defined as: place of birth (not residence), as follows – indigenous is non-Lima coast, Andes and Amazon, but not those districts which are departmental capitals
[b] The HI measure is the ratio of the mean years of schooling between the groups indig/non-indig. h=e/b. The male and female HIs are the ratio of indigenous men or women to the average HI for the non-indigenous group, f/b,g/b
[c] The HI is the ratio of the per cent literate, indig to non-indigenous
[d] The HI is between the % with secondary education or more, indig/non-indigenous

The importance of including gender was further confirmed by our survey of perceptions of identity. As part of the international study, and to establish some key facts, and in particular a basis for comparison with other studies in the project, we undertook a survey of how people saw themselves. We carried out the survey in three sites, surveying some 200 informants in each site. We deliberately chose populations who were largely marginal in their social positioning. The methodology

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[9] A word with various usages and subtle meaning: when self-ascribed, it is used usually with pride and indicates a closeness to one's indigenous origins – more so than if the word *mestizo* is used. See Paredes (2008).

and the findings are described in detail elsewhere (Sulmont 2006; Paredes 2007). It is important to note that we did not aspire to national representativeness with the survey, so our findings can only be taken as suggestive at anything beyond the local level we study.[10] We must also stress that this survey was designed to elucidate the *private* self-identification, not the public identification or the way others identify a person.

Here we report one finding only: we asked all informants to tell us which three of a list of characteristics were most important in defining 'their identity as a person'. The results are shown in Table 2. Overwhelmingly, people rated '*ser hombre/mujer*' (being male or female) and their occupation as the most important. But it is clear that ethnicity is also important: the three overlapping ethnic markers in the list – place of birth, mother tongue and racial origin – accumulated between them one-third of the places, more than any other, and if place of residence is included, almost as many as gender and occupation together. We felt confident from this that both gender and ethnicity feature strongly among the multiple dimensions of identity in the populations we were studying in Peru.

Table 2: The percentage of informants who thought a particular characteristic was important in defining 'their identity as a person', in various survey locations

	Total	Huanta	Bambamarca	SJL-Lima
Gender	69.4	65.7	72.1	70.6
Work or occupation	52.4	38.5	62.7	56.7
Place of birth	39.3	53.5	31.3	32.3
Mother tongue	36.1	49.8	26.4	31.3
Religion	32.7	30.5	36.8	30.8
Racial origins	21.3	25.8	15.9	21.9
Place of residence	18.0	18.3	19.9	15.9
Political ideas	13.7	11.3	10.9	18.9
Belonging to an organisation	6.3	1.4	10.4	7.5
Other	1.3	-	2.0	2.0
DA / NK	4.6	3.3	4.0	6.5

Source: Sulmont (2006)

2. A Framework for Considering Collective Action

In the context of the analysis of a hierarchical society, with deeply embedded inequality, it is the imbalance of power that principally concerns us. So within this research programme, the ultimate measure of success for collective actions that have implications for group inequalities is the shifting of the balance of power. Remedying material inequality may – or may not – contribute to remedying that imbalance. Thus action targeting pollution by a mine may shift the power relations between, say, the mine owner and the community – and/or achieve welfare improvements, which may in turn consolidate the shift in power – or the welfare improvements may consolidate a paternalistic relation which embeds the power imbalance. Or a women's group working to improve the provision of food for their families may improve nutrition but simply consolidate women's subordinate position

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[10] We had no easy way of solving the problems posed by the complexity of our topic. We know that given discrimination and a history of oppression, how people speak about their identity, and in particular ethnic identity, is never straightforward, and a questionnaire format has severe limitations as a result. What we did do, however, which proved very rewarding, was to conduct in-depth follow-up interviews with a sample (5%) of the surveyed population.

by the way it confirms them in their traditional role. So 'success' may sometimes be at best ambiguous.

This discussion makes clear that there may not be a direct relation between the achievement of the group's objectives and our criterion of success. A group driven to collective action by an immediate need may succeed in one sense and in its own terms. Whether it succeeds in the second more 'strategic' sense may need further analysis. Here the distinction made by Molyneux in the context of gender is helpful. She made it initially in her analysis of the Nicaraguan revolution and the tensions between feminism and socialism (Molyneux 2003: Chapter 2). She distinguishes 'strategic' from 'practical' gender interests. In that context, strategic interests derive from 'the analysis of women's subordination and from the formulation of an alternative more satisfactory set of arrangements to those which exist' (p.43). This analysis leads to the formulation of strategic objectives to overcome women's subordination. Practical interests are 'usually a response to an immediate perceived need'. Such practical interests 'do not in themselves challenge the prevailing forms of gender subordination' (p.44). We find it useful to be open to the idea that the concepts may function as a continuum, as Molyneux (2003: Chapter 6) proposes.[11] Thus we recognise that the group action itself may succeed in building interests and agendas slowly, even without the group being aware of what is going on. We take 'strategic' as 'challenging the system': in our case, systemic inequality in power relations. We also find it helpful to apply the same distinction between practical and strategic to other forms of collective action, such as the *rondas*[12] of Cajamarca, one of our earlier group of case studies, where the collective action gradually developed in the group a sense of pride and autonomy, leading them to engage on more equal terms with the rest of the world (see Munoz, Paredes and Thorp 2006).

Given that interests and agendas may build slowly, it follows that 'empowerment' may, and probably will, also be incremental. Women may gain more control over their own lives, by increasing their capacities, self-confidence, skill in networking, and awareness of the wider world. But meanwhile there will be obstacles to a fuller empowerment, coming from obstacles in the attitudes and practices of the society with which they are interacting. These obstacles are typically a product of both ethnicity and gender.

One phenomenon that we identify in the study is that the extent to which group action challenges power relations is not limited to the 'interests' of the group carrying out the action. There may be a challenge at a further level, through the experiences of the group members, so that the rebalancing of power may take place in other contexts. Thus a collective action may remain focused on practical interests – but may nevertheless be assisting the participants to achieve deeper political awareness. This highlights the possibility that the collective action may indeed have contradictory elements.

The literature on collective action divides into what brings it about in the first place, what determines the evolution of the action, and what determines its ultimate success or failure. All these questions are relevant to our interest in 'embeddedness'.

Turning to the specifics of the literature, at the first level of analysis – what brings about collective action – most authors tend to take initial grievance or market failure

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[11] In Molyneux (2003: Chapter 6), she proposes the concept of gradual progress and also recognises that what is 'strategic' depends on the underpinning vision of the group and/or the analyst.
[12] Community organisations, originally 'watchdog' in function.

for granted as incentives and focus on why mobilisation and coherence as a group is so difficult. A classic line of analysis focuses on the free rider problem and asks how and where this is overcome (Olson 1965; Ostrom 1990). Much of the case study material showing how the free rider dilemma can be overcome concerns economic activity at the micro level, where variables such as a clearly specified group of beneficiaries, clear rules owned by participants and appropriate incentives and sanctions can explain success (see Ostrom 1990; Wade 1988; and Uphoff 1985, among many). At the meso level of communal and trans-communal actions, our area of interest, such variables are unlikely to be enough to explain success. In the literature, cooperation is facilitated and made the more likely, the more there are overlapping interests and leadership. For us, 'overlapping interest' needs a broad interpretation, which goes far beyond the coincidence of individuals' material gain. The degree of overlap will be the greater, the stronger the sense of common identity and common ideology, and the less the lack of internal differentiation within the community of actors. As we have seen in earlier work[13], internal differentiation may play both a positive and negative role. It may facilitate leadership through the hierarchy it creates and the resulting sense of order; it may produce internal conflict via perceived inequity in resources and power and via the abuse of power.

A second level of analysis focuses on mechanisms and processes. Tarrow (1998), for example, focuses on how coalitions function as action moves to the meso level. He develops the difference between the face-to-face contacts of a 'primary' group concerned only with organising actions within its boundaries, and the more impersonal contacts needed as a group begins to relate to a wider political context with 'trans-communal' coalitions. He also emphasises the ability of the group to evolve from concern with one set of issues to the next and more strategic stage. Tilly's work (Tilly 2004) adds an emphasis on the internal strength of the group: its learning and memory. We have found these ideas important in our analysis of our case studies.

A third strand looks more explicitly at the effects of the overall political environment, to explain ultimate success or failure. The focus is on the significance of the state, the structure of power and the organisation of daily politics in shaping and reshaping collective action (Tilly 2004). It is not only that the interaction between contesters and the authorities affects the internal behaviour of the group, as they exchange and learn from each other (rhetoric, models of action and organisation frameworks [14]); but also it is within this political environment that the groups need to have impact. Tilly's analysis has significant resonance in all our cases.

3. The Case Study: the *comedores populares*

Much collective action led by women in Latin America – and certainly in Peru – has been driven by extreme need, indeed threat to survival. In Peru – initially in Lima but spreading elsewhere – women banded together in self-help initiatives which were driven by the debt crisis and hyperinflation of the 1980s and then by the savage stabilisation programme of the early 1990s under Fujimori. This was 'practical

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[13] See Heyer, Stewart and Thorp (2002), particularly the chapters by Bianchi on Brazil and by Thorp on Colombia.
[14] According to Tilly, people learn how to mobilise as a function of the response of other parties to their collective action, including the response of government authorities; and governments and those who hold the power themselves have interests in fostering some forms of collective action, tolerating others and eliminating yet others.

interest' indeed. These are the initiatives we have chosen to study to push further our analysis of the obstacles to the success of collective action in modifying inequality.

It is important to our story to recall that violent conflict and hyperinflation were together demoralising the country by the end of the 1980s. The armed forces and Sendero Luminoso were engaged in vicious battles, with both sides responsible for deaths. On the side of Sendero a terrifying campaign was under way to attack all who attempted to work in an intermediary, constructive role between state and people. Sendero is a Maoist-inspired movement, not ethnic in discourse and led by provincial middle-class university teachers, but in the 1980s and 1990s it thrived on indigenous people's sense of marginalisation and deprivation. In the economy, Garcia's attempt to grow out of inflationary stagnation produced hyperinflation by 1998-9. Fujimori's victory in the 1990 election was followed by a massive constriction of demand and adjustment of relative prices, causing huge poverty, but killing inflation in its tracks by 1992. The intelligence forces' capture of Sendero leader Abimael Guzman and one third of the movement's leadership in September 1992 had beneficial effects on violent conflict. The impact on Fujimori's popularity from the ending of two terrifying phenomena was such that he was able to implement an increasingly dictatorial and corrupt regime virtually without public protest.

3.1 The Growth and Significance of the Movement

The '*comedores populares*' movement, or people's kitchens, began in the late 1970s, centred in Lima but eventually spreading elsewhere.[15] These collective actions initially grew simply from working women aiding each other. The flavour is well given in the following description: Gloria Libia, a neighbourhood leader in El Agustino, a Lima *barrio*, recalls, "At first, we were a sort of women's club. For example, we taught the *señoras* to read and write, we did literacy work. Then we saw the needs of our *pueblos*, for example, myself and others left very early in the morning to work at La Parada [the market]…We left our children at 5 a.m. and only returned at 1 p.m. to cook for them….In one of our meetings, an idea was raised by one of our members who had seen a *comedor* in another neighbourhood. We thought, why don't we start one ourselves?" (Schonwalder 2002: 158). By 1986 there were 570 such *comedores* in Lima (Huaman 1987, cited by Lora 1996). By the end of the decade the number was being put at around 1,000 (Cordova and Gorriti 1989).

The standard feminist critique of the time identified 'social' collective actions as somehow inherently antagonistic to a progressive political movement which would be able to challenge power relations. This was partly a matter of a perceived narrow focus on short-term material and practical goals – food for their families. It was also a matter of the dangers of dependence and corruption when the 'core business' involved seeking food aid. More deeply, the kitchens were seen as reinforcing women's stereotypical domestic and caring role, depending on unpaid labour.[16] [17] The conclusions of such an analysis unfortunately coincided with those deriving from

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[15] Sara-Lafosse (1984) locates the first initiatives in Comas and El Agustino in 1978 (starting with children's breakfasts and progressing to the full idea of a *comedor* by 1979.

[16] The tensions implicit in such social actions are skilfully analysed by Molyneux in a thought-provoking paper on social policy (Molyneux 2007), which compares the comedores to the Mexican *Oportunidades* programme. She is considering principally those *comedores* that were started by agents of the state, or co-opted by them.

[17] The division implicit in this critique echoed the division in the developing women's movement at the regional level. The Latin American women's movement was riven with diverse agendas and class difficulties (Barrig 1994; Vargas 1991).

a totally different constituency: *machista* elements in Peruvian society considered that this was all 'just women's work'.

However, as we will argue here, based on interviews with numerous key actors and the NGOs supporting them, and on secondary sources, such a negative view cannot be justified for a significant proportion of the *comedores* – possibly for all those described as 'self-managing' (*autogestionarios*), as opposed to those initiated by government or donors (a category that began to grow rapidly under both Accion Popular and APRA in the 1980s). By the late 80s, this 'autonomous' proportion of the total population of CPs is still put at 60% by Carmen Lora, admittedly a vigorous defender of the CPs (Lora 1996).[18]

In the first place, women who began collective action because they could see the value in pooling resources and effort (taking turns cooking, buying in bulk) rapidly found they needed skills to manage money, purchasing, diets etc. Classes in literacy and various skills were in great demand. From this grew consciousness-raising discussions on family issues, domestic violence, and topics such as small business management (Lora 1996).

Secondly, as conditions became harsh with the collapse of Garcia's effort to grow out of inflation in 1986-87, so women realised they had to understand the world at whose mercy they so evidently were. So new elements were added to the classes and debates (Lora 1996).

Thirdly, at an early date the women of the *comedores* realised that collective action was far more effective if the individual *comedores* linked together.[19] Powerful federations developed in the different regions of Lima. By 1989 there were 42 '*centrales*', or groupings, with 15-40 kitchens belonging to each[20], and in 1991 a formal federation was formed (FECCPALC, Federation of *Centrales* of Self-managing People's Kitchens'). The importance of this grouping is demonstrated in the efforts of successive governments to avoid the federation and deal directly with the kitchens. The increased level of coordination led to the gradual consolidation of a political agenda around a food programme which used nationally produced ingredients, was linked to measures to support the small-scale agriculture producing these ingredients, and promoted indigenous ways of cooking healthy local ingredients. The documents contain a sophisticated analysis of the problem caused by food imports and the potential 'virtuous circles' implied by fostering consumption of Andean products.[21] What hit the headlines, however, was what was interpreted simply as a demand for 'subsidy', an emotive word given the multilateral-led fight against practices such as subsidies. In fact the key demand was for equal treatment with the kitchens sponsored by the governing APRA party, which were receiving free rations. The development of the agenda led, by 1988, to the first food march: the '*Protesta con Propuesta*', or 'Protest with a Proposal'. We come below to the barriers this social and political action encountered. Here, the point we wish to make is the organisational capacity in evidence, the mobilisation capacity displayed and the interactions with government and other actors which ensued, further developing capacities. This was attested to in a poll of views about women as political actors in

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[18] See also Blondet in Molyneux and Razavi (2002); Cueva and Millan (2000: 47).

[19] All observing the early comedores were impressed by their capacity for networking and organisation. Violeta Sara-LaFosse, interview, Lima, 3-12-07.

[20] See Lora (1996: 39). On p. 40 she gives a reference to an evaluation of the *comedores* carried out by FAENA, documenting the effectiveness of this move to a more centralised structure.

[21] See Lora (1986: 50ff and Appendix 2).

1997, cited by Blondet as demonstrating that '…the experience these women gained in social and political organisations and trade unions over the last fifteen years was vital in building a self-image of efficiency, developing self esteem and gaining confidence in their ability – and that of other women – to assume positions of public responsibility' (Blondet 2002: 283 and footnote 8).

Various actors played key roles in supporting the *comedores* to articulate and broaden their agenda and acquire new skills. These actors came from the political parties, above all the United Left (IU) and from the NGO sector. Particularly significant was the success of the IU in the municipal elections in Lima in the early 1980s. In various Lima slums the IU-led municipality launched local development efforts, notably in Villa El Salvador and El Agustino. Various municipalities gave the district committee of the *comedores* an office in the municipality (eg San Martin de Porras – Lora 1996: 136).[22] Equally significant and drawing on the same constituency of committed middle-class progressives, various NGOs were generous with time and effort in helping the *comedores* write the '*propuesta*', in promoting networking and education.[23]

In these early years, then, all the intermediate 'process' elements of success can be found in these independent *comedores*: the broadening of the agenda, constructive responses to support learning on the job, and effective networking. The role of outside actors was important, but these actors were channelling what was there already: a fierce determination to solve a common problem building on 'Andean' values of solidarity and mutual support.[24] Henriques describes the importance of the first-generation migrants from the Sierra in the early Lima collective experiences. Sara-LaFosse describes her experiences researching *comedores populares* in the early 1980s, when she and her colleague visited 27 of the 100 or so that existed at that time.[25] The Sierra migrants had remarkable skills in collective organisation and networking. The kitchens led by women from the Coast lacked these characteristics.[26] These years were characterised by non-hierarchical principles: everyone took turns in cooking and common solutions were found for shared difficulties. In the opinion of these experienced analysts of the *comedores*, it is the indigenous roots and qualities of the movement that gave it peculiar strength and effectiveness. Without doubt, the solidarity of gender and shared need consolidated that coming from ethnicity.

However, there were serious obstacles at the third level of analysis we identified above: the disempowering political context in which collective action takes place. The first obstacle fully confirms our previous analysis: no matter how vigorous and coherent the collective action may be, it still runs into the sand because of the nature of the political system at local and national levels. The magnificent '*Protesta con Propuesta*' was turned back, with police using violence against women and children to prevent them reaching the Presidential palace. There was no reply other than that: the march was to be repeated year by year as a form of symbolic protest and was soon known as the '*Protesta con Propuesta sin Respuesta*'[27] – without reply. So one aspect of the groups' lack of power is simply the lack of channels: the women with their constructive proposal had nowhere effective to take it.

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[22] See also Schonwalder (2002:160ff).
[23] Alternativa, FOVIDA and SEA are the most frequently mentioned.
[24] Carmen Lora, interview, Lima 27-11-07.
[25] Narda Henriques, interview, 28-11-07; Violeta Sara-LaFosse, interview, Lima 3-12-07.
[26] Violeta Sara-LaFosse, interview, Lima 3-12-07.
[27] The story of this movement is well told by Lora (1996: Chapter 6).

Another example that shows how the *comedores* struggled in this chaotic context comes from Schonwalder's evocative description of the evolution of municipal politics in the 1980s and 1990s in San Agustino, a *barrio* of Lima: the story makes it abundantly clear how prone to divisiveness and suspicion local politics were (Schonwalder 2002). Lora (1996: 140) has a nice description of how ordinary people's view of local politicians, and the politicians' view of such organisations as the *comedores* (ie, that they were just interested in their own narrow, sectoral claims), together created a 'subtle but consistent' wall between them.

A further difficulty was the issue of gender. In addition to the problem of the ease with which the *comedores* could be dismissed as 'just women's stuff', the difficulty of being a woman in Peruvian politics is clear: 'You are always in a minority of one or two, the men monopolise the posts, the debate. There are plenty of qualified women. But there is discrimination, including by some women…You know they're just waiting for you to finish speaking'.[28]

In addition to the gender dimension, the new element which this case adds to our earlier studies of collective action is the evidence it provides on vulnerability to both cooptation and violence. Ironically, it was the very success of the collective action – and its evolution from collective action to 'movement' – that brought strong and destructive responses.

From the early 1980s the self-help *comedores* had existed alongside 'party-political' kitchens, run by both Accin Popular and Aprista. Both with Belaunde and then increasingly with Garcia's government, food aid was an issue. The early autonomous kitchens did not receive food from the state. It would have required extraordinary far-sightedness to realise in the early 1980s that to fight for PL480 supplies[29] on the same terms as the Aprista *comedores* was a dangerous path. Indeed, the culture of rights was much in the air in 1986-7: the fight for a law giving equality of rights to food aid to all *comedores* seemed an important battle.[30] A key analyst and participant in the process records that there was never any discussion of the problems and dangers of PL480 imports.[31] In 1988, amid the growing crisis, Garcia decided to centralise all food aid distribution and the in-fighting intensified '*por la manguera*' – to access the gravy train. So, while we have argued that the nature of the activity – survival – did not make a move to a more challenging agenda impossible, it did leave the *comedores* terribly vulnerable to political forces and to pressures from competition and corruption.

3.2 The Weakening of the Movement

As the economic crisis deepened following the Fuji shock, the number of *comedores* soared. By the end of 1991, figures as high as 7,000 were being cited in Lima alone. It was impossible for the NGOs working in building capacities and support to do more than scratch the surface of this need. As a result, many were left with no institutional support, in a frightening context. As a careful observer and participant says of this expansion, 'It was impossible to provide, on the scale required, spaces for reflection, for formation of a critical awareness, awareness of the importance of bonds of

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[28] Marisa Glave, local councillor, interview, Lima, 26-11-2007
[29] PL 480 imports are imports of free or highly subsidised food from the US under US Public Law 480 allowing for the disposal of surpluses.
[30] Carmen Lora, interview, Lima 27-11-07.
[31] Cecilia Blondet, interview Lima 3-12-07. Blondet played a leading role in NGO support to the *comedores* movement, and attempted to work for six months with the Toledo government as Minister for Women. .

friendship…and to forge ways of behaving based in solidarity and mutual support, as had been done for the first generation of kitchens' (Lora 1996: 31).

As the culture of solidarity weakened and the focus on acquiring food supplies increased, so the vulnerability to internal divisiveness and the danger of corruption increased. Sendero was able to take advantage of this within its own strategy to defeat 'civic' collective action. Having, with reason, identified the *comedores* as perhaps *the* key obstacle to its penetration of the Lima slums, Sendero was now able to use these conditions of vulnerability and distrust to spread more discord. For Sendero, the leaders were exactly the kind of people they needed to target: examples of constructive self-help, interfacing between the state and the poor. Sendero was able to use accusations of corruption to justify the assassinations it began to carry out in 1989-91 in Lima. Of some 100 community leaders killed by Sendero in 1989-92, 24 were women leaders from the *comedores* and glass of milk movements[32] (Burt 1997: 302-3). Burt reports an interview from 1994 in San Juan de Lurigancho, where a member of the movement claims to see Sendero's assassination of a local *comedor* leader as justified as she was involved in corruption. Leaders found themselves under death threats and were obliged to withdraw; NGOs also pulled back (Barrig 1994: 172)[33]. The movement was savagely weakened in its leadership. The assassination of Elena María Moyano, *comedor* leader and deputy mayor of Villa El Salvador, became symbolic of this oppression.

At around the same date as the increase in violent attacks on the *comedores*, Fujimori was coming to realise the voting power represented by the movement. In great need of a political base, he began a systematic effort at cooption. He created a Ministry for Women in 1996[34], but gave it 'a maternalist discourse' based on 'the role that women played, are playing and should play as "natural" mothers and care-takers of the family and the community' (Boesten 2003: 117). 'Foodstuffs came with aprons and cooking hats in orange, the colour of Fujimori's movement, and with the PRONAA logo, and there was the obligation to paint the kitchen with state-issued orange paint and put PRONAA on the kitchen's façade. A large picture of the hero of the nation, Alberto Fujimori, had to be hung on the façade of the building as well…loyalty to the government was enforced by the threat… of the withdrawal of alimentary support' (Boesten 2003: 118).

Added to this, a further weakening was occurring because, with the crisis, more women were seeking work. In addition, with increasing education levels, at least in Lima, increasing differentiation was occurring, and with this greater potential for division. The growing number of second-generation migrants, rather than first, probably assisted the shift in values. As some women became busier, they started to pay others to take their turn for them. So '*socias pasivas*' and '*socias activas*' (passive members and active members) developed. PRONAA, the government's food distribution agency, deliberately targeted the so-called 'active' members and encouraged them to get themselves elected. [35] As Lora describes it, the passive members gradually became distanced and the active were gradually more subject to PRONAA. The whole culture shifted and became more orientated towards securing

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[32] The 'Vaso de Leche' or Glass of Milk programme started at the municipal level in Peru in the mid-1980s, to provide subsidised milk and other products to children and pregnant or breast-feeding women. By 1998 it was reaching 44 per cent of households with children aged 3-11.
[33] Numerous women commented in interview on how leaders had received threats and had had to act very prudently or flee (Susana Villaran, interview, Lima 29-11-07)
[34] Initially called the Ministry for the Promotion of Women and Human Development.
[35] Carmen Lora, interview, Lima, 27-11-07

food. Complaints to the Ombudsman about the behaviour of PRONAA brought no response.[36]

The years 1994-6 were disastrous: an important actor and witness of the process thinks that all of the *comedores* were seduced in those years.[37] The techniques were simple: 'when the bus came to take you to a demonstration, you had to get on or you didn't get supplies'.[38] After 1996 came the fight back and work to raise awareness. 'You don't lose your identity for a sack of potatoes or a bag of rice', as one interviewee put it.[39] But then in 1998 came a new opportunity and threat: the Ley de Cuotas (Law of Quotas), which stated that in municipal elections 25% of the candidates on a list had to be women. Fujimori asked people to stand in the 'elections' that followed his closure of Congress, persuading them with implicit promises of aid for political support.[40] Quite a number of the older leaders of the movement now moved into politics, some with much heart-searching, given that the 'elections' were widely felt to be a façade for a very non-democratic regime.[41]

We thus see how the combination of a climate of fear and violence, economic pressures and political strategies of cooptation and bribery served to weaken the culture of mutual help and shared responsibility, which together with the imperative of survival reinforced vulnerability to manipulation and division. A further element of weakening was the failure or shakiness of many efforts to introduce productive activity to the *comedores* – micro enterprise. This often did not work well. The two logics, of solidarity and the market, while they can be made to fit together, do not do so without considerable care.[42]

The surprising fact is that under severe attack from both Sendero and the clientelistic political system, and also exposed to the contradictions of the interface with the market, a significant number of the autonomous *comedores* survived, and still survive today. The estimation of how many is difficult, as one of the many obstacles faced by the movement has been an excessive willingness to write it off as coopted and subservient, or self-seeking and subsidy-hungry. We were not able to conduct a sample survey, which would be revealing, but interviews with authoritative people working closely with the autonomous element leave no room for doubt that 'a significant proportion' of the truly independent *comedores* survive today as real sources of empowerment. Benedicta Serrano's view is that, of the independent comedores, 25% today are empowering and empowered[43]. Relinda Sosa, another notable leader, thinks that the majority of the original independent *comedores* 'kept the faith', and today comprise some 25-30% of all *comedores.*[44]

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[36] Pina Huaman, interview, Lima, 30-11-07.
[37] Benedicta Serrano, interview, Lima, 29-11-07. She finished her term as president of the Junta Directiva of the Federation of Comedores in 1994. We return to her career after that below.
[38] Maruja Barrig, interview, Lima, 27-11-07.
[39] Benedicta Serrano, interview, 29-11-07.
[40] See Blondet (2002: 303) for a detailed account; also Blondet (1996). The evaluation of PRONAA published as Portocarrero et al (2000) has evidence on the role of that organisation (p. 136).
[41] Benedicta Serrano described her heart-searching eloquently in interview. She finally decided that the view of a wise personal advisor was correct: "politics happens on the inside. Go in but don't allow yourself to be contaminated' (the Spanish was '*machada*' – stained).
[42] Virginia Vargas, interview, Lima, 3-12-07.
[43] Benedicta Serrano, interview, Lima, 29-11-07.
[44] Relinda Sosa, interview, Lima, 27-11-07.

The analysis, then, is of the "glass half full or half empty" variety. The collective action grew into a movement: it is tantalising to see how severely it was damaged by forces outside the movement. But even with so much damage, suffering and frustration, much has still been achieved, and the surviving truly autonomous *comedores* are indeed a challenge to the power imbalances implicit in being indigenous, female and poor. The role of women such as Benedicta Serrano has shifted the culture: she has respect on all sides for the role she has played and continues to play, and she is not alone. Benedicta, as a first-generation migrant to Lima, represents that group which we have described as indigenous/*cholo*. While all our interviewees were clear that it is difficult to be a woman in Peruvian politics, Benedicta, as a local councillor responsible for social affairs, was able to achieve enough of her agenda to feel satisfied, and was able to defend the *comedores*. This kind of challenge to the system's hierarchy is significant.

4. Summary and Conclusions

The autonomous *comedores* were a spectacular success over more than a decade. They gave 'associational space' to indigenous and *chola* women at a time when they were otherwise confined to a domestic frame.[45] Women perceived the need to network and achieved a solid structure in the federations, and not only in Lima. The felt need for new skills and understanding led to a widening of the agenda and the movement grew in political presence and strategies. Its very success, however, precipitated the subsequent damage. Sendero targeted the movement with horrific success. Fujimori also saw both the movement's potential in terms of votes and its value as a welfare programme, and used crude but effective techniques of cooptation and bribery. The result of both onslaughts was to weaken the movement's links to its allies, as well as to weaken those allies. But we have argued that the movement was nevertheless able to survive both onslaughts. The movement remains today a source of progress in empowerment and an efficient way of enabling women to work – itself part of empowerment.

There is no doubt that the majority of *comedores* by the 1990s were not of this nature, and that some of the original 'autonomous' *comedores* lost part of their emancipating qualities with time. Even the most progressive of the 'autonomous' *comedores* had limited horizons in terms of 'changing the balance of power'. Much of the 'success' was survival and substitution for the state. At one level the obstacles were exactly those faced in our previous case studies of collective action in Peru, and derive from the clientelistic and divisive nature of Peruvian politics, and from the lack of channels to integrate the micro with the macro in economic or political terms. Thus the march with its proposal went without reply. What we have added through this case is insight into the vulnerability to cooptation and to violence, as collective values weakened under pressure from economic necessity and violence, and divisiveness increased.

We acknowledged at the start that we can do no more than raise questions as to the role of gender in this instance of collective action. The nature of the core activity – the provision of food – has a contingent gender aspect in a society such as Peru's, and the nature of the activity made the movement particularly vulnerable both to division via corruption and to cooptation. But in Zimbabwe's elections in 2008, Mugabe's use of food as a political tool was not gender specific: it targeted men and women in its use of food supplies to buy votes. The move by the *comedores* into political action certainly encountered gender discrimination, but surely this was no more salient than the general inhibiting and disempowering state of clientelistic politics in Peru in the

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[45] Martin Beaumont, Director of Oxfam, Lima, interview, 1-12-07.

last 20 or more years. The future of the organisation is encountering today a contradiction which has nothing to do with gender: how a movement sustained by non-market values can achieve a shift to productive activities with explicit engagement with the market.

However, our own view remains that both a common gender and a common ethnic origin contributed to the sense of solidarity very much in evidence, which was in turn a potent instrument to counteract the lack of confidence and self-esteem resulting from a history of double discrimination. We are inclined to stress how gender, ethnicity and poverty come *together,* both as sources of group inequality and as providing a sense of group solidarity. It is possibly not fruitful to try to separate them. Thus in exploring policy implications it is important to note that the hierarchy that makes Peruvian politics and society so inflexible and inequality so rigid is built on the potent mix of several discriminations, and indigenous/*chola* women certainly face additional barriers because of their gender. We have shown that they find constructive ways through despite the barriers faced by all marginal indigenous-origin people in Peru – the nature of Peruvian politics, the lack of channels for communication or representation, the culture of clientelism, and discrimination as well – but in addition they face the hugely disempowering barrier which a macho culture adds to that collection of obstacles.

We have documented a significant challenge to hierarchy, but also the obstacles it faces. We cannot do other than agree that the barriers to shifting power imbalances are huge, and all the greater when different hierarchies overlap. However, if a society can grow in understanding both the hierarchies and the barriers, and the dynamics which operate, the chance of modifying its rigidity, and eventually its inequality, can be increased.

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