

### **Abstract**

This paper examines communal kitchens in Lima, Peru, to illustrate how such self-help organizations transcend the collective preparation and consumption of meals. Participation in communal kitchens empowers some women by giving them increased self-confidence and enabling them to become politically active and to participate in decision-making processes. The study concludes that the higher women's level of participation in the kitchens, the greater their empowerment.

The author suggest that communal kitchens open a political space for a collectivity that has historically been denied this space by virtue of its gender, class, and ethnicity. Through their efforts to centralize and maintain their autonomy from the state, women in communal kitchens challenge their position in society and envision new and less hierarchical social relations.

### **About the Author**

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## **Meals, Solidarity, and Empowerment: Communal Kitchens in Lima, Peru**

by

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# MEALS, SOLIDARITY AND EMPOWERMENT: COMMUNAL KITCHENS IN LIMA, PERU

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

The number of urban poor in Peru has increased dramatically over the past three decades as a result of extensive rural-urban migration, a high birth rate, and a faltering national economy. Political violence in the Andes during the last decade has also resulted in increased migration to the cities. At least a third of the population of Lima, the nation's capital, live in squatter settlements locally known as *pueblos jóvenes*. Residents of *pueblos jóvenes* suffer from poor housing, health problems, and an almost complete lack of government social services (Anderson and Panzio 1986; Barrig and Fort 1987; Schmink 1986).

This study examines *comedores populares*, or communal kitchens, in Lima, Peru.<sup>2</sup> Communal kitchens are self-help organizations in which women from different families collectively prepare food that is later consumed in their homes. Communal kitchens attempt to reduce the cost of food and increase the nutritional quality of local diets by means of economies of scale and food donations.

In addition to enabling women to pool resources and share cooking responsibilities, communal kitchens are part of an intense--although at times silent--mobilization of low-income women (Barrig 1989a). The significance of communal kitchens is at least twofold. First, it has been suggested that given increasing poverty, lack of employment, and an extraordinary increase in food prices since 1985, communal kitchens dramatically reduce the level of malnutrition in Peru (Maguiña 1989).<sup>3</sup> Second, communal kitchens are one of many survival strategies that enable the low-income population to reproduce itself in the midst of dire economic circumstances (Galer and Nuñez 1989; Haak and Diaz Albertini 1987; Huamán 1988). Even while reduction of food costs and provision of nutrition are the initial goals of individual communal kitchens, however, these grassroots organizations go beyond the preparation of meals and the collective organization of consumption (Barrig 1989a; Córdova and Gorriti 1989; Montes 1989).

Communal kitchens illustrate low-income women's struggles in multiple arenas: as women vis-á-vis men, as low-income women vis-á-vis the middle-class institutions which support them, as citizens vis-á-vis the state, and as indigenous/mestiza women vis-á-vis a mestizo/white dominant culture.

In this paper, I suggest that participation in communal kitchens empowers women and that an important element of such empowerment is the solidarity among low-income women that kitchens generate. I further contend that this solidarity and empowerment engendered in communal kitchens are vehicles for social change in Peruvian society. As I will demonstrate in this paper, however, solidarity and empowerment are less likely to occur

within communal kitchens that operate under state sponsorship, and more likely to occur in communal kitchens that are organized without state support.

The paper is divided in five parts. The first part is an overview of some theoretical concepts necessary for an understanding of the significance of communal kitchens. The second part is a discussion of my methodology and the process that led me to raise some of the questions I attempt to answer here. The third part provides an historical overview of communal kitchens. The fourth part is a summary of research findings from a study of five communal kitchens in Lima,<sup>4</sup> wherein I discuss the benefits that women find in different types of communal kitchens, the extent to which solidarity is forged in these organizations, and the extent to which women are empowered through their participation in kitchens. I conclude that communal kitchens organized independently from state support constitute a significant social movement through which low-income women are challenging their position in society and envisioning new social relations. In opening a political space for a collectivity which has historically been denied this space by virtue of gender, class, and ethnicity, communal kitchens challenge ethnic, class, and gender subordination.

### **Two Types of Organizations: *Comedores Autogestionarios* and Government-Sponsored *Comedores***

From the physical structure of the buildings in which they operate to their organizational structure, communal kitchens testify to the multiplicity of ways in which low-income women address their needs. Communal kitchens vary in their infrastructure and their access to donated foods as well as in the relationship they establish with other organizations.

Government-sponsored communal kitchens are in some ways very similar to *comedores autogestionarios* in their organizational structure. Clearly different types of organizations result, however, from the different relations in which these organizations engage with their funding or support sources.

The first communal kitchens appeared in Lima, in 1978. Eight years later, there were at least 600 communal kitchens in Lima and over one hundred in other Peruvian cities (Alternativa 1986; CEAS 1986; Sara-Lafosse 1984). By 1989, it was estimated that the number of communal kitchens in Metropolitan Lima had risen to 1500 (Córdova and Gorriti 1989), and by 1991 this number had at least doubled (Vecino 1991).

Members of communal kitchens participate in shift systems of rotation,<sup>5</sup> in which three to five women participate, prepare, and distribute a meal. They also do the shopping and cleaning up. Preparing a meal in a communal kitchen takes anywhere from three to six hours, depending on the conditions for cooking (such as the working condition of the stoves, of the size of pots) and on the number of meals the communal kitchen serves. In the communal kitchens I studied, between 30 and 190 meals were prepared and provided daily. Some communal kitchens, however, provide 200 to 300 meals each day (e.g., Bakker

1988; Sara-Lafosse 1984). Most communal kitchens serve one meal a day, usually *almuerzo*, or the noon meal. But many communal kitchens also serve *desayuno* (breakfast), or *lonche* (light afternoon meal). *Almuerzo* consists of two dishes, a soup and a *segundo* (main course), which includes a stew with rice and/or potatoes. Economic stress in a communal kitchen is often weathered through more intensive and longer hours of work for the women members (Chueca 1989; Córdova and Gorriti 1989). Only in extreme situations do women in communal kitchens resort to cutting down on the nutritional quality or the size of the meals. Although, during the period of my research, financial difficulties did force some communal kitchens to provide only the main dish.

### ***Comedores Autogestionarios***

*Comedores autogestionarios* are usually set up by groups of women neighbors who seek sources of funding or support for their communal kitchen from a non-governmental organization (NGO),<sup>6</sup> or a church. Support may arrive during the initial stages or later when the communal kitchen is already in full operation. At any rate, *comedores autogestionarios* enter into an array of relationships with various agencies and organizations such as local parishes, NGOs, and food-donating agencies.

Members of *comedores autogestionarios* rotate tasks not only for on-the-ground activities, but also for administrative positions. Tasks in the *junta directiva*, or governing body of a communal kitchen, include finding economic support and food donations, planning, calling, and leading communal kitchen meetings, attending and facilitating workshops, and meeting with leaders of other communal kitchens at the local and regional level. They also involve meeting with other grassroots organizations, and planning, designing and organizing strategies with service institutions, governmental and non-governmental organizations, private enterprises, and local leaders.

Some of the most striking characteristics of *comedores autogestionarios*, aside from their rotation of leadership positions, are their inclusive philosophy and their struggle for autonomy. These combined characteristics facilitate democratic relations within individual communal kitchens and within their highest level organization, i.e., the *Comisión Nacional de Comedores Autogestionarios*, or National Commission of Self-Governed Communal Kitchens (CNC). The various federations of *comedores autogestionarios*, as well as the organizations that support them, advocate not only the autonomy of individual communal kitchens but also that of local federations.

### ***Government-Sponsored Communal Kitchens under PAD***

Most communal kitchens solicit support from NGOs and churches. But when support is not forthcoming, communal kitchens may try government programs such as the *Programa de Asistencia Directa*, or Direct Assistance Program (PAD). PAD is the welfare program established by the Peruvian government in 1986. PAD communal kitchens are also formed at the suggestion of local political leaders affiliated with the party in office. Within the

government-sponsored PAD, autonomy is far from encouraged. In fact, dependency and faithfulness to the party are expected.

On-the-ground activities in PAD communal kitchens are quite similar to those in *comedores autogestionarios*. Among the members who work together in the PAD communal kitchen I studied, I found as much solidarity and participatory democracy as I did in *comedores autogestionarios*. Government-sponsored communal kitchens are organized locally under the control and advice of one agency, the *Programa de Asistencia Directa*. Members of *juntas directivas* of PAD communal kitchens meet regularly with social workers--usually party cadres--who are the intermediaries between the government and the grassroots.

Members of PAD communal kitchens cannot locally participate in other grassroots organizations. Some leaders and members of PAD communal kitchens in various districts of Lima, however, have joined the federations of *comedores autogestionarios* and participated in programs and events organized by the CNC.

The significance of this participation with the CNC is threefold. First, it shows an awareness among leaders of this type of communal kitchens and leaders of *comedores autogestionarios* of commonality of interests they have as low-income women. Second, it reveals some resistance on the part of low-income women who are challenging state regulations and yet are securing economic support for their organization. Third, it is an indication of the inclusiveness of the organization of *comedores autogestionarios*. Although the CNC was established in order to resist and contest state control, this commission is also challenging the divisions that PAD created among low-income women.

## Theoretical and Conceptual Background

### *Collective Action: Meeting Economic Needs and Beyond*

It is not surprising that given the current economic crisis and in the context of Peruvian inequality, low-income families must engage in new strategies to sustain themselves on a daily basis. Nor is it surprising that given a sexual division of labor in which women bear responsibility for the maintenance of the family, it is women, and not men, who organize communal kitchens. Women's participation in communal kitchens is related to the gender division of labor in Peruvian society. This division of labor assigns to women the primary responsibility for preparing meals for the family and for doing other types of work that typically produce use values but do not enter the market economy as exchange values. Low-income women tend to organize and join communal kitchens when economic stress affects them and their families (Huamán 1988). Nevertheless, benefits other than economic ones also motivate low-income women to participate in these organizations.<sup>7</sup> These benefits include connecting with other women and reducing the stress experienced as a consequence of being low-income indigenous women in a highly hierarchical society.

Political scientist Martha Ackelsberg (1988:302) suggests that

Liberalism denies . . . that politics is about more than simply meeting individual needs: that it can be, as well, an arena in which people work together with others and find pleasure and fulfillment in mutuality.

My research suggests that women in communal kitchens get together in order to achieve collective ends but that in the process itself they also find fulfillment and mutuality. This fulfillment derives in part from women's increased self-esteem, a variable which I found to be associated with women's participation in *comedores*. Self-esteem often gives women confidence in their ability to affect their lives according to their own design. In other words, women are empowered through their participation in these organizations.

Although a theory and definition of empowerment has yet to be developed, the concept of empowerment can be drafted from the literature on women in development generated by Third World activists in this field.<sup>8</sup> According to Moser (1989:1815), an empowerment approach to women's development

questions some of the fundamental assumptions concerning the interrelationship between power and development that underlie previous approaches. While it acknowledges the importance for women to increase their power, it seeks to identify power less in terms of domination over others (with its implicit assumption that a gain for women implies a loss for men), and more in terms of the capacity of women to increase their own self-reliance and internal strength. This is identified as the right to determine choices in life and to influence the direction of change, through the ability to gain control over crucial material and nonmaterial resources. It places far less emphasis than the equity approach on increasing women's "status" relative to men, but seeks to empower women through the redistribution of power within, as well as between, societies. It also questions two underlying assumptions in the equity approach: first, that development necessarily helps all men, and second, that women want to be "integrated" into the mainstream of Western-designed development, in which they have no choice in defining the kind of society they want.<sup>9</sup>

Empowerment, therefore, involves increased confidence in the oppressed individual and a necessary challenge to the structures and ideologies that maintain oppression. This view holds that a necessary element of empowerment is a feeling of connectedness which enables oppressed individuals to confront these structures and ideologies with the support of each other. In this sense, it is essential that solidarity exist within a group for the group to be empowered.

Although empowerment is a difficult variable to measure, one can say that women are empowered when their self-confidence is enhanced, when they become agents of change

in relation to the social relations in which they are involved, including gender relations, and when both their increased self-confidence and changing social relations are translated into political action and decision-making.

### *Practical or Strategic Gender Interests*

Women organized in communal kitchens are mobilized through their status as low-income women and by virtue of their gender position in the sexual division of labor. They do not form communal kitchens in order to challenge the nature of such a division, nor to question the inequality of Peruvian society; rather, they organize the kitchens in order to carry out their responsibility for the well-being of their families despite their subordination and despite the current economic crisis.

What compels women to form communal kitchens are, in the words of Maxine Molyneux (1986), practical gender interests. Practical gender interests are interests women have as a consequence of their assigned roles in the sexual division of labor. Although these interests arise from gender subordination, they do not pose a challenge to it. Molyneux contrasts practical gender interests with strategic gender interests, or those through which institutionalized forms of discrimination against women will be removed (1986:284). If women in communal kitchens are mobilizing in order to better carry out the roles assigned to them in the gender division of labor, and if such division is at the core of women's subordination, to what extent do communal kitchens aid the emancipation of women and to what extent are they instruments of their own oppression? Can it be assumed that women's collective action in communal kitchens merely reinforces women's roles and therefore contributes to their subordination? Are low-income women who organize communal kitchens challenging the structures that are oppressive to them? Are women in communal kitchens acting collectively in order to provide what the state is not providing, and therefore, subsidizing the state? Last, but not least, if women in communal kitchens are confronting the state, and challenging the existing social order, will their mobilization come to an end once their practical interests are met, or will communal kitchens contribute to low-income women's emancipation? I return to these questions at the end of this paper.

### **Methodology**

My research in Lima included informal interviews with women from eight communal kitchens and participant observation in seven of them. I spent ten months visiting the various communal kitchens, talking with women, and sharing some of the work of the communal kitchen. During the last month of fieldwork, I conducted a survey of 114 women in five of the seven communal kitchens I observed. As can be seen in Table 1, the median age of women surveyed in these communal kitchens ranged between 30 and 38 years old, and their median family income between US\$9.60 and US\$6.17 a week. Between 14 and 31 percent of women were heads-of-household and at least 39 percent of women were migrants. In most communal kitchens, however, more than 80 percent of survey participants

were migrant women. Table 2 shows that although the majority of women surveyed had some level of formal education, more women had attended only primary school than secondary school, and only a few had any level of higher education. Twenty-two women who lived or worked in the neighborhoods where fieldwork was conducted but who did not participate in any communal kitchen were also surveyed. Additional interviews were conducted with representatives of communal kitchens elected to the CNC, and with social workers and officials involved in programs established to support communal kitchens in Lima.

My original research questions were mainly concerned with the effectiveness of different types of communal kitchens in distributing food, and in achieving their goals of reduced costs and better nutrition. I also wanted to learn whether communal kitchens offered advantages to women beyond the communal kitchens themselves. I was particularly interested in the effect of women's participation in communal kitchens on gender roles within families, and on women's involvement in political organizations at the local level. In addition, I wanted to examine the changes that had occurred in communal kitchens during the past decade and how the first autonomous communal kitchens had been organized and operated and how PAD had affected such autonomy.

I began the research in Chorrillos, a district South of Lima where I concentrated on three different communal kitchens. By initially concentrating the research in a single district, valuable insights into the organization of communal kitchens were obtained and provided potential comparative data for future research in other districts. While limiting the focus to one district, however, continuous contact with members of the *Comisión Nacional*, and women from communal kitchens in other districts of Lima, allowed me a perspective on communal kitchens at the national and regional levels. Four months into the fieldwork, however, it became clear that I would need to extend the scope of the research to include other districts, if anything close to an accurate picture of the "communal kitchen phenomenon" was to emerge.

Because the main focus of my research was on *comedores autogestionarios*, I expanded my observations to include other similar kitchens in two other districts of Lima. Although I gained in comparative material, I lost considerably in terms of in-depth case study research. What I gained in breadth, I lost in detailed participant observation. In addition, halfway through my fieldwork, one of the communal kitchens I had been observing in Chorrillos closed.

I have called the communal kitchens studied and included here *La Inmaculada*, *El Almendro*, *La Balanza*, *Santa Inés*, and *Solidaridad*. *La Inmaculada* is a government-sponsored kitchen in the district of Chorrillos. *El Almendro*, also in Chorrillos, is a communal kitchen which is in transition; it had been a *comedor autogestionario* for eight years but turned to government sponsorship during the period of my research. *La Balanza* and *Santa Inés* are both located in El Agustino, a popular district near the center of Lima. *Solidaridad* is also a *comedor autogestionario*, but unlike the other communal kitchens

studied it is closed to non-members.<sup>10</sup> *Solidaridad* is located in *Villa El Salvador*, a 17-year-old settlement which is now a district of Lima.

Looking at the larger picture of communal kitchens in their variety of forms, one question continued to surface throughout my research: Are communal kitchens part of a social movement which will be instrumental in effecting social change? Comparisons of the various types of communal kitchens in three different districts of Lima provided useful insights in my first attempt to answer this question.

In addition to comparing the effects that women's participation in different types of kitchens had on women and their families, I also compared the effects that their different levels of involvement had on them and their families.

Three groups of women were identified. The first group includes members who participate in the everyday running of communal kitchens and are also involved in their governing bodies. I have called these women *officers*. The second group includes members who participate in the everyday running of communal kitchens but who do not have leadership positions. I have called these *members*. The third group is formed by those women who are regular patrons, but who are not members, I have called these *consumers*.

Table 3 shows the number of women in each category that were surveyed in each communal kitchen. Although I met regularly with leaders of *comedores* whose leadership roles prevented them from being involved in the everyday running of communal kitchens, I did not include any of these leaders in my survey. The women included in the survey were randomly selected among regular patrons because I was mainly interested in the effects of daily participation.

To examine whether women in communal kitchens are empowered, my research questions attempted to shed some light on how different communal kitchens and different levels of participation enhanced women's self-confidence, generated changes in gender relations, and promoted change in women's involvement in neighborhood politics.

Before discussing the extent to which officers, members, and consumers are empowered in different communal kitchens, I turn to an historical overview of these organizations.

### Historical Overview

After the first *comedores autogestionarios* were formed in 1978 and 1979, the governments of Belaúnde (1980-1985), and García (1985-1990) created what appeared to be programs of support to communal kitchens. In reality, these politically motivated programs created parallel organizations and excluded previously existing communal kitchens from state support, particularly during the government of President Alan García.

During that time, low-income women who were organized in *comedores autogestionarios* responded to government exclusion with increased organization. They protested government policy, proposed alternative programs, and demanded to be included in state programs without surrendering the autonomy of their organizations. In the process, what began as survival strategies became a social movement.

The first communal kitchens to appear in Lima in the late 1970s and early 1980s were autonomous, or self-governed communal kitchens. Although usually run and managed by neighborhood women, these communal kitchens often received assistance from parishes or NGOs. Early communal kitchens were usually formed by groups of women previously organized under the auspices of food-donating programs.<sup>11</sup>

Since 1980,<sup>12</sup> political parties elected to government have sponsored communal kitchens. The American Revolutionary Popular Alliance party (APRA) began to sponsor communal kitchens during the 1985 electoral campaign that brought President Garcia (1985-1990) to power. A year later, APRA-sponsored communal kitchens were institutionalized through the PAD, or direct assistance program. PAD was a governmental welfare agency dependant on the presidency and chaired by Peruvian first lady Pilar Nores de García.<sup>13</sup> PAD offered communal kitchens legal recognition and support in the form of donated food, cooking equipment, and food subsidies. Support was given selectively, however, to groups of women that were organized under APRA leadership.<sup>14</sup>

In 1986, women leaders of self-governed communal kitchens organized to contest discriminatory programs such as PAD and PAIT. They formed a national commission known as the *Comisión Nacional de Comedores Populares Autogestionarios* (CNC). Since then, the CNC has been working to further organize low-income women and to federate communal kitchens around the country.

The CNC was formed during a conference organized by the *Comisión Episcopal de Acción Social* (CEAS), or Episcopal Commission for Social Action. The conference was originally sponsored so that organized low-income women could discuss the limited rate of success that income-generating programs were having for them.<sup>15</sup> This immediate economic concern, however, was hardly discussed at the conference. Instead, a long-term political goal was placed on the agenda: the autonomy of communal kitchens vis-á-vis the state. Since then, the struggle for autonomy has been central to the organization of self-governed communal kitchens.

The struggle for autonomy in women's organizations such as communal kitchens occurs at multiple levels: it is a struggle for autonomy vis-á-vis families, neighborhood organizations, political parties, and middle-class institutions. Their quest for autonomy is in part influenced by women's legitimate fear of being manipulated (Backhaus 1988; Barrig and Fort 1987; Blondet 1991), and by the legitimate fear of losing their identity if absorbed by a mass organized party (Hellman 1990). Combined with an educational experience that challenges hierarchical relationships, autonomy is, as Jelin (1984) has asserted, a basis from

which women question the system. This is a system in which hierarchical relations permeate every aspect of social organization and culture. Attempting to be autonomous, communal kitchens are refusing to be controlled by any group or institution that has socially-sanctioned power over them, including low-income groups dominated by men and a male view of the world.

Since its creation, the CNC has demanded incorporation of all low-income women--and not only of those affiliated with the party in power--into existing welfare programs. In addition, the CNC has been actively involved in designing, planning, and proposing national food policies and social programs, and has continued to be an official representative of communal kitchens across the country.<sup>16</sup>

By forging solidarity among low-income women across neighborhoods and districts, the CNC provides a platform from which low-income women resist and contest hierarchical social relations vis-à-vis the state and the middle-class institutions which support them. In opening a political space for a collectivity which has historically been denied this space by virtue of its gender, class, and ethnicity, communal kitchens challenge ethnic, class, and gender subordination. Nevertheless, while the CNC is breaking new ground by establishing new social relations for low-income women, these relationships are still imbued with a hierarchical heritage that needs to be challenged to fully achieve the democracy, popular participation, and solidarity endorsed by the movement. In addition, this movement must confront increasing political violence which is currently prevalent in Peru, in particular that of the guerrilla movement *Sendero Luminoso*, or Shining Path, which has declared war on communal kitchens and other popular organizations.<sup>17</sup>

## Research Findings

### *Meetings and Meals in Communal Kitchens*

Some of the most striking differences I found among communal kitchens were not found in their everyday operation, nor in the cooperation I observed among women participants, but rather in their relationship (or lack of relationships) to other communal kitchens in the neighborhood, district, and region. In addition, I found that while members in some communal kitchens met frequently with each other and with members of other communal kitchens and kitchen federations, other communal kitchens did not. Communal kitchens that were associated with a federation had more meetings or assemblies, and women's participation in these meetings had several effects on them.

*Asambleismo*, or having many assemblies, has been pointed out as a characteristic of women's popular organizations. Frequent assemblies are a problem for members who have to put in additional hours to meet with other members and for officers who must meet with officers of other communal kitchens. They are also a problem because they often generate

conflicts with family members, in particular with husbands who want to see their wives at home.

The empowerment of women, however, may be related to the frequency of meetings in which women participate within their communal kitchens, as well as with other organizations. While the members of some communal kitchens participated in regular assemblies, members of other communal kitchens met only when a major problem arose. I found that assemblies were held less often in government-sponsored communal kitchens than in *comedores autogestionarios*, and that members of government-sponsored kitchens seldom met with members of other communal kitchens or grassroots organizations. I also found that the same communal kitchens which have frequent meetings also rotate their leaders regularly, while those communal kitchens which do not participate in regular meetings had had the same leaders for longer periods of time.

The significance of frequent meetings cannot be overstated. It is in assemblies that members of communal kitchens participate in decision-making processes regarding the style and content of their organizations. It is also in assemblies with other communal kitchens in the neighborhood and district that they communicate their problems and try to reach joint decisions which strengthen them as a popular movement--and not just as a survival strategy within the neighborhood.

Through assemblies, the views, preferences, and needs from the grassroots reach the leadership, and vice-versa. Frequent assemblies make the processes of decision-making more democratic, contributing to women's self-confidence, and encouraging them to participate fully.

Two groups of communal kitchens can be distinguished in my sample according to the frequency with which they organized or participated in assemblies. The first group is formed by two communal kitchens which had assemblies only when a problem arose. These are *La Inmaculada*, formed under the auspices of PAD, and *El Almendro*, a *comedor* which was in the process of affiliating with PAD after eight years as a *comedores autogestionario*.

The second group is formed by those communal kitchens that participated in frequent and regular *comedor* meetings, district assemblies, and regional meetings. These are *La Balanza*, *Santa Inés* in the district of *El Agustino*, and *Solidaridad*, in *Villa El Salvador*. *La Balanza*, *Santa Inés* and *Solidaridad* are all *comedores autogestionarios* and all closely associated with federations of communal kitchens in their districts.

My data suggest that *comedores autogestionarios* might be more efficient than government-sponsored communal kitchens in distributing inexpensive meals to low-income families. Economies of scale, subsidies, and donations enable communal kitchens to provide inexpensive meals. The prices of meals in communal kitchens (which vary from *comedor* to *comedor*) could not be matched by individual families preparing the same meals at home. My data further suggest that *comedores autogestionarios* were more efficient in reducing

expenses for low-income families. Of all the communal kitchens I observed, meals were the most expensive at *La Inmaculada*. This was the case despite the fact that *La Inmaculada* had access to special subsidies and donations from PAD.<sup>18</sup>

Table 4 shows the prices of meals for members and non-members in each of the *comedores* surveyed. Also shown are the minimum and maximum number of meals that were distributed in each *comedor* during the period of one week, as well as the number of families to whom meals were distributed. As the figures indicate, prices are highest in *La Inmaculada* (*comedor* PAD) and lowest in *Solidaridad*.

The data collected in my survey and my own observations suggest that *comedores autogestionarios* are more efficient than government-sponsored communal kitchens in providing cheaper meals and solving the problem of scarcity, as well as in promoting the participation of low-income women in these and other grassroots organizations.

Although economic need may be a primary factor in bringing women to the communal kitchen, it is probably not the determining factor motivating them to stay in the organization.<sup>19</sup> Other benefits women perceive from their participation in communal kitchens significantly change women's lives in ways that transcend practical gender interests.

#### *Beyond Economics: The Significance of Female Solidarity*

Beyond the economic benefit of reducing the cost of meals and confronting the scarcity of some products, the communal kitchen is also a strategy against the isolation and stress that low-income women experience as a consequence of their role in the gender division of labor and their limited access to services and employment opportunities.

Stress and isolation, however, are also a function of an oppressive system which divides people in order to maintain and reinforce their subordination. One of the ways in which oppressed groups are hurt most is through the internalization of their own oppression. Internalized oppression justifies one's own subordinate position in society in accordance with existing stereotypes and prejudices about the subordinate group to which one belongs (Gálvez and Todaro 1990; Mohanty 1984; Pheterson 1986; Yamato 1990).

In the case of low-income women, internalized oppression may lead them to underestimate themselves, therefore preventing them from connecting with each other. Instead, they may associate with people in more powerful social categories. As a consequence, the isolation and stresses they confront as women within a patriarchal society, and as low-income individuals within a system which denies them access to services, employment, and self-esteem, is accentuated. For example, low-income women may refuse to associate with women like themselves, or they may live their lives attempting to prove that they are different than the rest of low-income women in the neighborhood.

Economic need was the reason most often mentioned by women for joining a communal kitchen. When asked if they would continue participating in the communal kitchen if their economic situation were to improve, however, more than 75 percent of women members said they would continue participation in the communal kitchen in order to continue their relationship with other members.<sup>20</sup>

Clemencia, a married mother of five children, had stopped participating in the communal kitchen *Solidaridad* when her youngest child was born. Three months later, however, she reincorporated. I asked her why she returned.

First and foremost [I came back] because of the need. I could not make ends meet. And, on the other hand, I was sorry I could not share with my friends. I felt isolated. I did not want to be distant. If some day there comes an end to the communal kitchens, I don't know how it would be. I couldn't get used to that because every day I see my *compañeras*, we get together . . . . Sometimes we have so many problems at home, it is amazing but going [to the *comedor*] we forget [about the problems]. Of course we also have problems there, because of money, or anything else . . . .

Although the majority of women who participated said that they obtained meals from communal kitchens for economic reasons, they often discussed other benefits. For example, more women in my survey said that they bought meals at communal kitchens because this gave them time to do other things at home and fewer women said that buying meals from communal kitchens reduced family expenses.

My research suggests, however, that even members who obtain meals from communal kitchens regularly, seldom do so on a daily basis. Moreover, time saved in preparing meals at home--including shopping, cleaning, and the preparation itself--is often spent in other endeavors arising from the collectivity of the enterprise. Planning, scheduling, organizing meetings, and fundraising activities, balancing accounts, and communicating with other members through posters or personal communication, are all activities that take time (Bakker 1988; Córdova and Gorriti 1989; Galer and Núñez 1989).

I observed that women's participation in communal kitchens demanded an average of seven to eight work hours per day, but that not all women put in this number of hours every day. Women leaders often ended up putting in many more hours in their communal kitchens than did the women without office positions. Consumers, on the other hand, often benefited from obtaining meals at communal kitchens without having to invest any time beyond going to the communal kitchen to obtain meals.

How much time women really saved by participating in communal kitchens is therefore subject to debate and clearly difficult to estimate. Yet, despite the time demands, the general perception of women is that their participation in communal kitchens gives them more time and has a positive effect on their lives. Conversations with participants suggest

that together with more spare time, women felt that the communal kitchen reduced their levels of stress, a reduction they explained in terms of less rushing, less worry, and particularly, more time to relax with other family members.

The last of these, women indicated, improves family relations as well as allows for a better understanding of children and their needs, facilitating family solidarity. Women with school age children appreciated the fact that because they could count on the meals from the communal kitchens, they didn't have to rush to have lunch ready before sending the children to school in the afternoons.<sup>21</sup> This time savings, they suggested, averted considerable struggles with their school-aged children, something women appreciate deeply. A decrease in family tension can therefore be attributed to the collectivity of the enterprise.<sup>22</sup>

Being away from home in order to fulfill responsibilities at the communal kitchen generated conflicts between women and their spouses and children (Villavicencio 1989). This was particularly true of officers, for whom involvement in the communal kitchen poses greater demands on their time. Officers were away from their homes more often than members, especially during evening hours when meetings took place. The time devoted to the kitchens generated problems between officers and their partners, but in the long run, also generated changes in gender relations including the gender division of labor. At least one third of women who participated in communal kitchens reported that their involvement in the kitchens generated a better understanding of their work by their husbands. Women attributed their understanding to the increased visibility that communal kitchens brought to their work and their contribution to the sustenance of the family. I expand on this point in the next section when I discuss women's empowerment in communal kitchens.

*Comedores* are appreciated by women because of the ways in which they positively influence family and neighborhood relations. Table 5 shows the percentage of women in each *comedor* for whom social relations have improved as a consequence of their participation in the *comedor*. More than 50 percent of the total number of women surveyed felt that their participation in communal kitchens had a positive effect on family relations, and at least 57 percent perceived an increase in mutual help among women neighbors through communal kitchens.

*Comedores autogestionarios*, however, might be more successful in forging women's solidarity than are other kinds of *comedores*. Table 5 shows the percentage of women in each *comedor* who believed that participating in *comedores* increased mutual help among neighbors. At least two-thirds of the total number of members surveyed in all communal kitchens said that participating in communal kitchens encouraged cooperation among women neighbors. However, a higher percentage of women members of *comedores autogestionarios*, than members of *La Inmaculada*, felt this way. The study suggests that increased solidarity among neighbors is encouraged by *comedores autogestionarios* to a greater extent than is encouraged by government-sponsored communal kitchens. Even in *El Almendro*, a *comedor* facing many organizational difficulties at the time of my research, women's solidarity

expressed in terms of cooperation among neighbors is encouraged to a greater extent than it is in *La Inmaculada*.

Communal kitchens may be a basis for support and friendship (Bakker 1988; Montes 1989; Moser 1986; Sara-Lafosse 1984) otherwise difficult to achieve in the context of the low-income settlement (Bourque and Warren 1981:34). The support women find in each other within communal kitchens was often mentioned as a reason for women to continue their involvement. This support takes a variety of forms: having a shoulder to cry on and commiserate about one's misfortunes; receiving advice from other women as to how to deal with children and spouses; or having someone to watch one's children while running an errand.

Nevertheless, it cannot be taken for granted that low-income women who participate in communal kitchens are able to form these support networks. Relations with neighbors in the context of low-income settlements are not always smooth or easy. The low-income setting offers as much potential for antagonism as it does for cooperation. For example, lack of privacy and insecurity and vulnerability to theft are common in *Pueblos jóvenes* (Lobo 1982; Tovar 1986b), and may put families on guard toward neighbors. Cooperation with other families may therefore be discouraged. These conditions are far from ideal for promoting women's solidarity. As was mentioned above, however, it is not only such living conditions which may jeopardize women's relationships with each other. Internalized oppression, as discussed earlier, may explain some of the personal conflicts which occur in communal kitchens. By virtue of the solidarity that communal kitchens promote, however, they have an outstanding potential for social liberation.

It is sometimes assumed that because low-income women live in poverty, they can easily work communally. In fact, this is not always the case. Individual antagonisms among subordinated groups are made worse by the hierarchical structure in which they live. A desire to be different (or better) than the majority of working-class settlers may result from the way in which oppressive conditions are experienced and internalized. In addition, women are pressured to conform to social norms that are beneficial to men and detrimental to women. For example, protecting the family "honor" or good reputation may prevent women from talking about their husbands' abuse, and in general from connecting with other settlers like themselves.

Interpersonal conflicts do occur in communal kitchens. Unfortunately, these conflicts reinforce other stereotypes prevalent about the low-income population, such as the belief that low-income women are unable to work together harmoniously because they tend to fight over minor issues and are prone to gossip.<sup>23</sup>

Stereotyping of low-income women is advantageous to more privileged economic sectors that perpetuate these stereotypes. However, this stereotyping is also advantageous to, and disseminated by, low-income men who try to keep their wives away from communal kitchens, arguing that communal kitchens are growing fields for gossip and conflicts among

neighbors. Many men, for example, try to keep women divided and under their control, discrediting communal kitchens and the women in them (see also Lenten 1989). Despite this discouragement, women members of communal kitchens build networks of cooperation and solidarity among themselves. In contrast to the stereotypes, most women who participate in communal kitchens feel that communal kitchens promote cooperation among neighbors.

In the next section, I discuss the extent to which low-income women are empowered as a consequence of their participation in communal kitchens. Empowerment will be assessed in relation to three variables: changes in gender relations, increased self-confidence, and participation in neighborhood politics.<sup>24</sup>

### *Are Women Empowered Through Communal Kitchens?*

Women's solidarity is forged in communal kitchens despite a cultural setting that does not encourage solidarity. But to what extent is the empowerment of women who participate in communal kitchens translated into changes that might be strategically favorable for women?

In this section I discuss three aspects of women's lives in which I found some change associated with women's participation in communal kitchens, and which could be classified (in line with Molyneux 1986) as strategic for women's emancipation.<sup>25</sup> These aspects are: gender relations and the gender division of labor, women's self-confidence, and women's political participation.

While different types of communal kitchens promote various degrees of change in women's self-confidence and political participation at the local level, I did not find a significant relationship between the type of communal kitchen and changes in gender relations. I did find, however, significant differences in the changes that communal kitchens generate for women according to their level of involvement in *comedores* of all kinds (see Tables 6, 7, 9, 10 and 11).

During my research I observed that participation in communal kitchens did generate some change in gender relations and increased women's self-confidence. I also found that when women participated in communal kitchens they were more likely to increase their participation in the local politics of the neighborhood, and in decision-making processes occurring at neighborhood councils. My data indicate that the higher their level of involvement, the higher the chances women have of becoming empowered. Empowerment is not overwhelming, however, if one considers that in any one of the areas mentioned above change occurs for less than half of the women surveyed, and in some cases for only a third of them. My conclusion should therefore be taken with caution.<sup>26</sup>

The majority of women surveyed in my study said that their husbands approved of their participation in communal kitchens. As shown in Table 6, however, no significant

pattern can be observed if these data are analyzed by type of communal kitchen. On the other hand, when spousal approval is analyzed according to women's involvement in communal kitchens, some revealing patterns arise. Table 7 shows that spousal approval is more common among officers and members of communal kitchens than among consumers.

Approval, however, is usually gained with time. For example, the husbands of 47 percent of officers, and of 44 percent of members, had changed their attitude regarding their wives' participation in communal kitchens. They now approve what before they had opposed. On the other hand, only 30 percent of consumers' husbands had changed their attitudes and currently approved of their wives' participation.

Yet, even those women who felt they had the approval of their husbands to participate in communal kitchens, often mentioned that husbands (and children) did not particularly like the food from the *comedor*, or that the amount served by communal kitchens was not enough to satisfy their appetites. Table 8 shows that only 33 percent of the husbands of women officers liked the food or felt that the amount of food included in a meal was sufficient to satisfy their appetites. In general, complaints about the food from communal kitchens can be subtle ways in which families resist women's participation. Note, for example, that in Table 8 approval of *comedor* food is higher among the husbands of consumers than among those of officers. The higher rate of change in attitude among the husbands of officers is not surprising given the increased consciousness of officers. Given the time that women officers dedicate to the *comedor*, however, it is not surprising that more husbands of officers show dissatisfaction towards the food, a subtle way to protest their wives' absence from the house when blatant opposition is not viable.

It is clear that the constant complaints and nagging of their husbands did not prevent women from participating. Forty-two percent of women participate despite the fact that their husbands would prefer them to stop participating, suggesting that women do struggle within their own homes, and oppose their husbands' resistance to their involvement in popular organizations. Moreover, the majority of women said that although their families did not like the food of the communal kitchen at the beginning, with time they usually got used to it and ended up accepting and liking it.

When I asked Daria, a 45-year-old officer at *Solidaridad*, what her husband thought about her participation in the communal kitchen, she said:

Well [my husband] is happy, the only problem is that he says he is not satisfied with the meals from the *comedor*. Sometimes I prepare something extra. But he has changed. He used to demand more. Now he has gotten used to the food of the *comedor*. He used to tell me "oh, you waste your time there at the *comedor*, and that food that they prepare is not good." But that was at the beginning. Now he doesn't say anything. He accepts that I have meetings and everything. Before, he used to get upset.

Even men who agree with their wives' participation in communal kitchens, if given the choice, would prefer women to leave the communal kitchen. Other husbands would prefer that their wives cook for them. In a society where gender ideology prescribes that a woman should cook for her husband, women take special pride in being good cooks. Complaining about the food provided at the communal kitchen, and comparing it to the good taste and better nutritional value of the meals prepared at home by their own wives, is therefore an effective strategy many men use to persuade their wives to stop participating in communal kitchens. But most women resist and only a few give in.

Some changes occurred in the homes as a consequence of the changing conditions under which women's work was performed in the communal kitchens. Cooking collectively instead of individually, and in a public space instead of in their own private homes, for example, had some effect on women's and men's consciousness. I found that significant changes occurred in the perception that family members had of women's work. For example, families became more sensitive to the amount of work that preparing meals involves for women. Men's awareness of "women's work," is best explained by a member of *La Inmaculada*:

[My husband] did not use to understand. He was always telling me that I just hang around and do not attend to the house or the children. When I started [participating] in the *comedor* he'd tell me I was just wasting my time. But then he realized how much one has to work. He saw for himself how much work it is because one spends the day there.

However, as can be seen in Table 9, when asked whether their husbands were becoming more understanding of their participation in communal kitchens, it is members and not officers who report more positive change in their husbands. Many women, especially officers, end up being away from their homes long hours and fail to perform the domestic tasks they are expected to perform. In some cases, husbands then start to help with chores that only women did before.

Elisa, an officer of *Solidaridad* and mother of five children, explains the long-term consequences of women's absence from the home and of the increased participation of their husbands in domestic work:

. . . I cannot tell my children that we have to share [responsibility for domestic work] . . . if at home [my husband] does not help. But I think we are achieving something because in as much as we, the women, leave [the house] more often to go to our meetings . . . , we leave, for example, without sweeping the floor, this gives us problems, of course, but [we go out] just the same. So in the homes there are many things to do but as we go out and fail to do them, our husbands, even if they complain about it, they take the broom and start to sweep. Even if complaining, they see the [dirty] clothes that start to pile up and they help. And my son . . . he sees that his father is doing it

and you know how children imitate, so he also starts washing his clothes. So, [they are] protesting and saying "now the women go out, they are '*callejeras*' (out of the house a lot), now we have to do the washing, we'll have to find another mother," and all that, but they are doing it . . .

A number of husbands had begun to help with domestic chores since women had joined their communal kitchen.<sup>27</sup> Despite the claims of such women, significant differences regarding spousal domestic participation are found among the three groups of women interviewed. Table 10 shows that while 40 percent of the women officers who had a male partner reported an increase in their husband's help with domestic chores since they had joined the communal kitchen, 31 percent of the members and 26.7 percent of the consumers reported change in the same direction.

Nevertheless, change in gender relations and the gender division of labor occurs in less than half the families regularly involved in communal kitchens. An officer explains

in other homes there is still a lot of *machismo*, there are problems of abuse. The husband gets upset, beats his wife. There is a lot [of this]. *But now women don't put up with this . . .*

The sense that *now women don't put up with this* comes from a general consensus about the development of women's self-confidence within communal kitchens. This is a second area of women's lives in which I found that change had occurred in relation to women's participation in communal kitchens. The development of women's self-confidence which allows women to stand up for themselves, and prevents them from putting up with behavior or norms that are oppressive to them, comes from a variety of sources. Within all types of communal kitchens, women's self-confidence develops in part from their opportunity to share their thoughts and opinions with other women like themselves, while at the same time fulfilling their obligation to prepare the meals for their families. Within *comedores autogestionarios*, the development of self-confidence is particularly associated with the experience of democracy that these communal kitchens promote. Unlike the democratic political process by which people are mobilized to vote every five years, in *comedores autogestionarios* democracy is exercised daily.

Experiencing democracy within *comedores autogestionarios* means participating with full rights and responsibilities and being included in decision-making processes. Within *comedores autogestionarios*, democracy means having the responsibility to contribute and being recognized for such a contribution. Women in all types of communal kitchens tend to develop self-confidence, in part as a result of their rising consciousness about the importance and value of their work. The communal kitchen becomes the living proof of their knowledge and resourcefulness despite their daily experience of economic poverty and deprivation.

Communal kitchens have also been called "learning to speak schools" (Barrig 1988) because in them women have developed certain levels of self-confidence which have empowered them to stand up for themselves. Learning to speak and stand up for oneself takes time and a fair amount of encouragement from other women in the organization. In all communal kitchens I visited, I found living examples of women's personal and political development. Time and again I came across outspoken women who had been shy in the past. I met many vocal women who, I was told, did not dare to speak up when they first joined their communal kitchen. But not all of them had learned from their experience in the communal kitchen alone. Many had become leaders in other organizations as well. With time, encouragement from other women, and increased participation, these women had become outspoken leaders of their organizations and, in some cases, of their communities.

I asked women if their involvement in communal kitchens had in any way changed their attitudes regarding voicing their opinions. I found that by participating in communal kitchens, women became comfortable in voicing their opinions, and that especially women who participate as officers became empowered in this way. This is the area of women's empowerment in which I found the most dramatic difference between women who participate as members or only as consumers. Table 11 shows that while 75 percent of officers said they now had less fear of expressing their opinions, only 29.4 percent of members (15 out of 51), and 8.8 percent of consumers had experienced change in this direction.

I also found that the longer they participated in communal kitchens the more women gained self-confidence and lost their fear of speaking up. More specifically, I found that change could be expected after women had been involved in the communal kitchen for one year. Regardless of their income levels, and of the type of communal kitchen to which they were associated, women developed more confidence in voicing their opinions as officers than they did as members or consumers of communal kitchens. Self-confidence and empowerment to speak up, however, do not always have a direct effect on women's political power.

Loosing the fear to speak up does not necessarily increase women's assertiveness within institutions of local political power where men predominate. I found, for example, that women's participation in decision-making processes within neighborhood councils had not increased to the same extent that would have been expected, given the degree to which their fear of voicing their opinions had decreased (see Table 11).

One would think that if women's assertiveness increases, their participation in the decision-making process in their community would also increase. However, the degree to which officers, members, and consumers increased their participation in decision-making processes at the neighborhood level is much lower than the degree to which they seem to become increasingly self-confident.

The ability of communal kitchens to engage women in local politics of the neighborhood is not very clear and in fact has been questioned by a number of researchers (Backhaus 1988; Barrig 1989; Blondet 1991). Neighborhood organizations are the most immediate political arenas in which major decisions affecting the lives of low-income women are made. The attendance of women at meetings, however, is very low, and women's participation in decision-making processes within neighborhood organizations is even lower.<sup>28</sup>

My data do not provide any strong evidence that communal kitchens have an overwhelming effect on women's participation at the neighborhood level. They do show, however, that the more involved women are in communal kitchens, the more far-reaching the consequences of their involvement in the local politics of the neighborhood. I found, for example, that the attendance at neighborhood councils tended to increase with women's level of involvement in communal kitchens. This is particularly true among officers and it occurs to a lesser extent among members and consumers. As shown in Table 11, I found that 40 percent (8 out of 20) of officers had increased the frequency of their participation in community councils since they had joined the communal kitchen, while only 27.5 percent (14 out of 51) of members, and 11.8 percent of consumers (4 out of 42) had done so.<sup>29</sup>

As shown in the same table, however, these women do not necessarily participate in decision-making processes taking place at neighborhood councils. For example, I found that 40 percent of officers, 15.7 percent of members, and 5.9 percent consumers had increased their participation in decision-making processes after they joined a communal kitchen. In other words, officers who increase their attendance at community councils also increase their participation in decision-making processes taking place there. On the other hand, only eight of the 14 members, and only two of the four consumers who increased their attendance at neighborhood councils, also increased their participation in the decision-making processes taking place there. These findings suggest that while officers are encouraged to participate in both neighborhood councils and in decision-making processes, only a few members and fewer consumers who increase the frequency with which they attend neighborhood councils are empowered to participate in decision-making processes.

My research shows that the women officers who step out of the realm of the immediate communal kitchen and the neighborhood and are elected to regional organizations are the ones who become more active politically. As noted, my survey did not include those officers whose political activity kept them away from the communal kitchen most of the time, but instead focused on those officers who had constant and unlimited contact with their communal kitchens. These officers often lacked the political sophistication of women who had been more exposed to other grassroots organizations besides their communal kitchen, but at the same time they are more representative of the majority of women who become involved in women's grassroots organizations. Among the officers surveyed, however, I observed higher levels of empowerment than among members and consumers. My observations and data suggest that women's participation in communal kitchens *does* empower women in the areas mentioned above, but that not all women are

equally empowered. Moreover, the higher their level of involvement in communal kitchens, the greater the likelihood that they will become empowered.

Rotation and training of officers are essential for the empowerment of women. Those communal kitchens which successfully rotate leadership with more frequency have the most potential for empowering more women and, in the long run, for influencing social change. In my sample, those communal kitchens are *Santa Inés* and *La Balanza* in *El Agustino*, and *Solidaridad* in *Villa El Salvador*. Only these three communal kitchens (all *comedores autogestionarios*) had effectively re-elected officers every year since their formation.

### Conclusions

Communal kitchens satisfy a multitude of needs for women, and provide survival strategies that enable the low-income population to reproduce itself in the midst of dire circumstances. Although the needs that communal kitchens satisfy arise from women's position in society and their role in the gender division of labor, women's participation in the kitchens serves them in strategic ways as well.

Some analysts of women's social movements in Latin American have questioned the ability of communal kitchens to generate change that is beneficial for women, arguing that organizations such as these reinforce gender roles and the gender division of labor. This study shows that although women organize in communal kitchens without attempting to challenge the gender division of labor, their involvement in these organizations often generates changes in dominant perceptions of women's work. Not only do women begin to see the social value of their work, but men also begin to better appreciate the services women provide and the time and energy that these services require from women.

In addition, the collective and democratic experience of communal kitchens gives women an increased sense of self-worth which does not occur when domestic chores are performed at home individually. Moreover, women's interactions with other women like themselves often encourage them to become further involved and to resist the opposition of their husbands who may see women's involvement in communal kitchens as a threat to the family unit. Further involvement in official positions at communal kitchens generates increased self-confidence for women. Members who engage in official positions within their communal kitchen also tend to increase their participation in community politics beyond the kitchen itself, for example in neighborhood councils, and they participate frequently in decision-making processes at these councils. These changes occur regardless of the type of communal kitchen in which women are involved. Nevertheless, important differences also exist between government-sponsored communal kitchens and *comedores autogestionarios*.

It is difficult to establish from my data the relationship of *comedores* to changes in the gender division of labor. This study suggests however, that women's involvement in *comedores autogestionarios* may in the long run generate more change in gender relations

than their involvement in government-sponsored communal kitchens. Women's involvement in the governing bodies of *comedores autogestionarios* necessitates frequent attendance at meetings. Frequent participation in meetings has at least two consequences. First, women's experience of leadership and democratic practices may give them more leverage at home, or may simply empower them to resist their husbands' and families' opposition. Men particularly resent their wives' absence from the household and the decreased availability of the services women provide when at home.

Second, the longer women are away from their homes, sometimes failing to perform the services they are expected to provide, the more opportunities for husbands and children to assist in domestic chores at home. My study shows that increased participation of husbands in domestic chores, a sign of changes in the gender division of labor, occurs more often among officers than among members who do not hold office positions, and more often among members than among consumers. These changes, however, occur in less than half the cases surveyed.

It is not unreasonable to expect that those communal kitchens which provide the most opportunities for women to take up leadership positions (becoming officers) are more likely to generate these changes. From my research it is clear that *comedores autogestionarios* which belong to a federation are the ones in which leadership positions are more often rotated, and where a majority of members and only a minority of consumers participate. As I mentioned before, my data suggest that more changes are associated with the level of involvement of women in their communal kitchens than with the kind of communal kitchen to which they belong. Changes were also associated with the length of time that women have been involved. Women's participation in decision-making processes at neighborhood councils however, is particularly higher among officers in *comedores autogestionarios*.

Given the social and economic conditions in which low-income women live in Peru, all types of communal kitchens provide a space for women to be political and to engage in politics without totally stepping out of their roles of mothers and wives. In the process, women in communal kitchens are redefining and expanding their social and political space.<sup>30</sup>

We may now return to the question I raised in my introduction to this paper. Whether communal kitchens are strategic for women's emancipation or if they simply satisfy women's practical gender needs, may ultimately depend on the type of organization that they establish and on the kinds of relationships in which they engage. My findings suggest that communal kitchens generate changes in such strategic areas as the gender division of labor only indirectly. Moreover, these changes are dependant upon women's level of involvement. Women's consciousness is more often raised when women take up official positions. *Comedores* will therefore be strategic for women depending on the generalization of the experiences that leadership offers. This study suggests that when women organize independently of state support, as is the case of *comedores autogestionarios*, they have more leadership exposure and experience and they could therefore be further empowered.

The second question I raised at the beginning of this paper concerns the consequences of women's organization in communal kitchens. One consequence for women is their increased self-confidence and participation in political affairs at the neighborhood level. These benefits are not, however, universal nor without their limitations. Women in communal kitchens, particularly leaders, work more (in and out of the communal kitchen), and suffer increasing stress, fatigue, and family conflicts. A more disturbing and serious cost of women's participation in communal kitchens has been the recent violence of *Sendero Luminoso* against senior leaders of *comedores autogestionarios*.

The importance of *comedores autogestionarios* as a social movement may be the most significant aspect of these organizations for low-income women and for Peruvian society at large. Low-income women who organize as a collectivity in communal kitchens, beyond their individual organization, claim a voice of their own. Their collective--and political--role as managers of their communities is more visible and more widely recognized, although more reluctantly accepted. Beyond individual communal kitchens, and through their federations, low-income women are demonstrating that they can work together. They are challenging the stereotypes which contribute to their subordination. Moreover, they challenge within themselves the internalization of their oppression.

In this social movement, low-income women are not only forging female solidarity, a revolutionary concept in itself, they are also using their roles as mothers to protest social injustice and violence and to envision a new society. From the symbolism of bearing life through motherhood, low-income women who are organized in *comedores autogestionarios* are stubbornly refusing to accept the life-threatening conditions in which the country's low-income population is living--such as malnutrition, unemployment, Peru's militarization, and *Sendero's* tactics (see Mujica 1992).

But the implications are clearly different for communal kitchens that are recipients of state support. While women in government-sponsored *comedores* play the role of the poor who receive the government's help, those in *comedores autogestionarios* propose alternatives and demand what is their right. The implications for gender relations must be underscored. If the organization of communal kitchens does not challenge gender subordination specifically, it challenges hierarchy and subordination in general. The *comedores* thus locate the connection between the eradication of gender subordination and other forms of oppression in the foreground of social relations (Sen and Grown 1987).

Participation in *comedores* fosters increasing consciousness among women about their own subordination as low-income women of color. This study of communal kitchens reaffirms that

feminism cannot be monolithic in its issues, goals, and strategies, since it constitutes the political expression of the concerns and interests of low-income women from different regions, classes, nationalities, and ethnic backgrounds (Sen and Grown 1987:18).

A third question raised at the beginning of this work concerns women's relationship to the state. As my study shows, it is clear that women in communal kitchens are buffers to the crisis, and that they are essentially subsidizing the food for their families through their own work. But their organization in communal kitchens also highlights the inadequacy of the Peruvian state. All low-income women (in all types of communal kitchens) may feel that demanding access to resources is their right. The relationship that women in *comedores autogestionarios* establish with the state is, however, fundamentally different from the one established by government-sponsored *comedores*. Moreover, their discourses are also significantly different.

On one hand, in the case of government-sponsored communal kitchens, it is the government that articulates and controls the discourse, which states that women in *comedores PAD* must organize under the auspices of a benevolent government that provides aid. In the case of *comedores autogestionarios*, on the other hand, the discourse is one of a social movement demanding its rightful access to resources, confronting exclusionary governmental policies, and organizing to propose alternatives. The ideology and practice of democracy, popular participation, and solidarity in *comedores autogestionarios*, is a social challenge to the current economic and political system.

Both *comedores autogestionarios* and government-sponsored communal kitchens are created to satisfy low-income women's immediate interests. Women in both types of communal kitchens design strategies to better confront the crisis and satisfy their needs as women according to their own individual and group possibilities. Organizing to cook collectively and to capture resources is part of the strategy chosen by women in both types of communal kitchens.

Government-sponsored communal kitchens, however, organize under the prescriptions of the government in order to be eligible for state support. In government-sponsored communal kitchens the state addresses, "women's immediate practical demands" in order to gain the support of women and without the advancement of women's strategic interests (Molyneux 1986:286).

The centralization of communal kitchens into district federations are key for *comedores autogestionarios* to demand support and access to resources without surrendering their autonomy to governmental or non-governmental organizations. One may say that through their organization into a national commission and into federations, low-income women organized in *comedores autogestionarios* are subverting a social order which is based on their multiple levels of subordination: as low-income settlers, as women, and as indigenous and rural migrants (or descendants of migrants) to the cities.

While government-sponsored communal kitchens are formed for the same reasons as *comedores autogestionarios*, they constitute themselves as "recipients" of state support according to state norms and regulations. Women in government-sponsored communal kitchens might be agents of their own "development" through their collective action, but they

do not constitute themselves as a constituency that is separate and therefore independent from the state.

Whatever the end-result of women's mobilization in *comedores autogestionarios*, the immediate effects that women's participation in communal kitchens has on women, their families, and society at large should not be underestimated. The formation of communal kitchens, and the fact that through them female solidarity is built, may in itself be considered an act of contestation to a doubly oppressive system--which not only assigns women specific roles but also restricts low-income women's ability to fulfill them. Communal kitchens may also be agents through which women's strategic needs are being pursued because they promote female solidarity and survive despite constant opposition and attacks by male members of the communities in which they are located.

More importantly, individual communal kitchens continue to represent strategies for survival. Through their efforts to centralize and yet retain their autonomy, however, low-income women in *comedores autogestionarios* are challenging their position in society and envisioning a whole new set of social relations. Whether communal kitchens will contribute to the emancipation of low-income women will depend on the generalization of their daily experience of participatory and inclusive democracy. My research suggests that this experience has already had an irreversible effect on the consciousness of women leaders and on members of their families. It is unlikely that even in the event of their demands being fulfilled, low-income women who have been active in communal kitchens will go back to the traditional roles assigned them by a society marked by sexism, racism, and classism.

## Notes

1. This paper is based on the doctoral fieldwork that the author conducted in Lima, Peru, between November of 1988 and September of 1989. Financial support was provided by the Inter-American Foundation, and additional funds were provided by the University of Iowa College Associations Council. A number of individuals--too many to be listed here--contributed to the completion of my research. Florence Babb and Michael Chibnik at the University of Iowa advised me from the initial stages. Helen Safa offered invaluable feedback and encouragement. While in Lima, Elvira Torres, Lucila Martínez, Patricia Córdova, Lucía Huaycho, and all the women from the communal kitchens mentioned here, were consistent sources of knowledge and inspiration. Sara Herrera, Teresa Peters, María Barreda de Mujica, Rosalbina Llanos, and Rosa Morales all took care of my son Martín at different times, freeing me to engage in research. Special thanks also are due to my siblings, whose affection is a constant supply of strength to me, to Mary Janell Metzger, and to my sisters from the Women Against Racism Committee in Iowa City who allowed me to grow with them. Last, but not least, I am thankful to G.B. Hammond whose commitment, support and encouragement have been essential all along; and to Martín and Luisa Hammond Mujica, who everyday help me understand the implications of mothering for women.
2. A direct translation of *comedor* is dining-hall. However, I use the term communal kitchen throughout this work because it conveys a more accurate sense of these grassroots organizations which are about collective preparation of food more than about collective consumption. Throughout this paper I use the term communal kitchen generically and *comedores autogestionarios* to refer specifically to communal kitchens which are not government-sponsored. Occasionally I use the term *comedores* in a generic sense.
3. According to the daily newspaper *El Comercio*, between 1985 and 1990 food prices increased by 200,000 percent.
4. Although my research included interviews with women from eight communal kitchens, the quantitative data derives from a survey conducted in five of them. See methodology.
5. I refer in particular but not only to those communal kitchens that existed during the government of President García (1985-1990). Although the information included here primarily focuses on events and developments from 1980 to 1991, I use the ethnographic present.
6. Non-governmental organizations usually dedicated to development, *promoción social*, and/or popular education are locally known as *centros*. They are legally defined as private associations for development (see for example, Padrón 1982; Sarmiento

1986). For a study that examines the ideological and political objectives of these organizations, see Riofrío, Rodríguez, and Welsh 1980.

7. On the other hand, women's economic needs and their role in the gender division of labor also prevent some women from participating in communal kitchens. Participants in communal kitchens need at least enough money to pay for the meals that are prepared. Families who lose their main source of income may have to stop participating because they cannot afford the meals from the communal kitchens. In some cases, women who obtain free meals in exchange for their full-time employment might have to leave the communal kitchen if work shifts conflict with kitchen responsibilities (see also Huamán 1988). In some communal kitchens, women who work full-time are allowed to participate and are expected to do chores that can be carried out early in the morning or late in the evening, such as hauling water to the communal kitchen. Moreover, lack of nurseries or day-care facilities in which to leave young children may also prevent mothers from participating in communal kitchens.
8. See for example, DAWN (Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era). *Development, Crises, and Alternative Visions: Third World Women's Perspectives*. Delhi: DAWN, 1987.
9. See United Nations Asian and Pacific Center for Women and Development (UNAPCWD), *feminist Ideologies and Structures in the First Half of the Decade for Women, Report from the Bangkok Workshop*, 1979.
10. Membership in a communal kitchen entails participation in leadership positions as well as in on-the-ground activities necessary to run the communal kitchen. However, in some communal kitchens women can participate only as consumers.
11. The spread of communal kitchens coincides with the increased donations of food from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Food is distributed by church organizations such as Caritas (Catholic), or the *Obra Filantrópica de Asistencia Social Adventista* (Ofasa), or by the central government.
12. 1980 marks a turning point in Peruvian politics, because it is then that Peru returned to "democracy" after 12 years of military rule. 1980 was also the year when *Sendero Luminoso* made its first public attack. Unlike other Latin American countries, the military rule (especially during the first five years) was more progressive than the governments which have returned to power afterwards. Ironically, human rights violations have risen enormously since the return to democracy (see for example, Bourque and Warren 1989; NACLA 1991).
13. During President Belaúnde's second term in office (1980-1985), Acción Popular had also created a number of communal kitchens. These were called *cocinas de Violeta*,

after Peruvian first lady Violeta Correa de Belaúnde, chair of *Cooperación Popular*, the government welfare agency created by Acción Popular. *Cooperación Popular* continued to function during García's government but was now in charge of the *Programa de Apoyo al Ingreso Temporal* (PAIT) (see next footnote). Many *cocinas de Violeta* closed down after Belaúnde left office. Others became *autogestionarias* or looked for government support.

14. Other programs such as the *Programa de Apoyo al Ingreso Temporal* (PAIT), or program of support for temporary employment, were also created during García's government. While these programs were supposedly directed to alleviate harsh conditions for the poor, various studies have demonstrated the political intentions of these programs (see for example Paredes and Tello 1988).
15. The NGOs that supported income generating programs, as well as the low-income women who asked for them, were finding that the income generated through these programs was much lower than they had anticipated. Some low-income women and some NGOs, however, still had high expectations for these programs.
16. For a study that questions the autonomy of communal kitchens from institutions and political parties, see Stokes (1988b) and Blondet (1991). For a discussion of the meaning and implications of communal kitchens' struggle for autonomy, see Mujica (1992).
17. On the Shining Path, McClintock (1989) has written

To most analysts *Sendero Luminoso* is the ugliest guerilla movement that has ever appeared in Latin America. Savage, sectarian, and fanatical, it is compared to Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge rather than to the *Sandinistas* or the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Movement (FMLN) in El Salvador.

For more recent comprehensive information about *Sendero Luminoso*, see NACLA (1990-91). In February 1992, Sendero killed María Elena Moyano, a 33-year-old woman activist from Villael Salvador, the popular district where *Solidaridad* is located. Moyano's death hit the movement of communal kitchens very harshly.

18. Although all the communal kitchens I observed had access to some kind of donation, none of the self-governing communal kitchens in my sample received a direct subsidy such as the one that *La Inmaculada* received from PAD.
19. Economic reasons, on the other hand, have been reported to me, to explain why women leave communal kitchens. For example, women often leave the communal kitchen for a job. Joining a PAD communal kitchen or enrolling in PAIT are also

economic strategies which are sometimes chosen instead of joining or staying in a *comedores autogestionario*.

20. This question was not asked of consumers.
21. Because in Peru there is a shortage of schools for the growing population, children have to go to school in shifts. Some go in the mornings, while others do afternoons.
22. Anybody who is a parent would appreciate the significance of having this struggle with children reduced to any extent. In a recent article on co-housing, for example, Dyan Wiley, a 38- year-old professional single mother now living in co-housing is quoted: "I yell at my daughter a lot while I'm making dinner." This article explains the significance of co-housing for Wiley in terms of having "extra time to spend with her daughter, now 4, while someone else is preparing dinner in the common kitchen" (*The Boston Globe Magazine* 1991:23).
23. It should be noted that these stereotypes are common to other subordinated social groups. As in any generalizations about socially subordinated groups, these stereotypes are not only disseminated and believed by those in more privileged groups (such as upper middle-class men), but also by those in the subordinated group itself. I found, for example, that gossip was a major concern of members, and a deterrent for many to become more involved. Many neighbors did not want to get involved in communal kitchens at all because they wanted to stay away from neighborhood conflicts and gossip. I observed, however, that conflicts and gossip among members were more a concern than a reality and that when they occurred they were usually triggered by economic problems or a crisis of leadership.
24. As I discuss in Part I of this paper, my definition of empowerment derives from the literature on women's development, and is understood as the power women gain in terms of their capacity to increase their self-reliance, to determine their choices in life, and to influence the direction of change.
25. Molyneux (1986:284) defines strategic interests as those which  
  
are derived from the analysis of women's subordination and from the formulation of an alternative, more satisfactory set of arrangements to those that exist. These ethical and theoretical criteria assist in the formulation of strategic objectives to overcome women's subordination, such as the abolition of the sexual division of labor, the alleviation of the burden of domestic labor and childcare, the removal of institutionalized forms of discrimination, the establishment of political equality, freedom of choice over childbearing, and the adoption of

adequate measures against male violence and control over women.

I did not include questions about sexuality in my research because the time I was able to spend with the women in each communal kitchen was limited.

26. My conclusions are tentative and will need further exploration.
27. Unfortunately, my survey did not provide more in-depth questions regarding the gender division of labor, or more detail about the tasks in which men participated. For an excellent account of the domestic chores that women who participate in grassroots organizations share with their husbands, and to what extent they do so, see Backhaus (1988).
28. Women's failure to participate in community councils has often been interpreted as a lack of political power. The existence of women's organizations such as communal kitchens which are marginal to neighborhood organizations has been interpreted as a sign of weakness, or lack of political mobilization on the part of women. In this view, whatever these organizations can achieve for women has been seen as limited (Backhaus 1988; Moser 1989). Another interpretation views women's organizations and their forms of engaging in politics as not necessarily marginal to the political process but as alternatives which will have to be accommodated by traditional political parties and other institutions (Helmann 1990; Stephen and Logan 1990).
29. My data also indicate that officers, members, and consumers who are involved in paid employment are more likely to increase their attendance at community councils after joining a communal kitchen than women who are not involved in paid employment. Moreover, I found that the higher the income of their husbands and the higher their total family income, the greater the chance that women in communal kitchens would attend neighborhood councils frequently. Poverty in itself may be considered a deterrent to women's political participation because women have less time and energy left for participating. On the other hand, I did not find that the number of years of schooling women have makes them more prone to increasing their participation in community council meetings since they had joined a communal kitchen.
30. Elsewhere, I argue that women's roles as mothers in communal kitchens provides them with a symbol of their struggle for their rights and dignity as low-income women in a society in which violence and oppression are an everyday experience, particularly if one is a low-income indigenous woman (see Mujica 1992).

Table 1

Demographic and Economic Characteristics  
of the Women Surveyed in each *Comedor*

Comedor	La Inmaculada N=28	El Almendro N=16	La Balanza N=23	Santa Inés N=25	Solidaridad N=21
Median Age	30	30.5	38	33	34
Migrant women	39%	81%	83%	92%	100%
Women heads of household	14%	31%	30%	20%	14%
Median number of children per woman	2	3.5	5	3	4
Median income <sup>a</sup>	\$2.60	\$3.75	\$2.60	\$2.60	\$2.60
Median family income	\$9.60	\$6.17	\$8.11	\$6.50	\$8.89
Per capita income <sup>b</sup>	\$2.19	\$1.23	\$1.46	\$1.56	\$1.65

<sup>a</sup>income estimated in U.S. dollars per week

<sup>b</sup>estimated

**Table 2**  
**Highest Level of Formal Education Attained**  
**by Women in Different *Comedores***

<b>Comedor</b>	<b>La Inmaculada</b>	<b>El Almendro</b>	<b>La Balanza</b>	<b>Santa Inés</b>	<b>Solidaridad</b>
	<b>N=14</b>	<b>N=9</b>	<b>N=17</b>	<b>N=15</b>	<b>N=21</b>
None	-	6%	21%	4%	4%
Primary School	29%	50%	62%	60%	58%
Secondary School	57%	44%	17%	32%	29%
Higher Education	14% <sup>a</sup>	-	-	4%	9%

<sup>a</sup>non-academic higher education

**Table 3**  
**Officers, Members and Consumers**  
**Surveyed in Each *Comedor***

<b>Comedor</b>	<b>La Inmaculada</b>	<b>El Almendro</b>	<b>La Balanza</b>	<b>Santa Inés</b>	<b>Solidaridad</b>
Total number of women surveyed	28	16	23	25	21
Members with office positions	1	5	4	6	3
Members without office positions	13	4	13	10	7
Consumers	14	7	6	9	-
Percentage of consumers	50%	44%	26%	36%	0%

Table 4

Meals, Prices, and Food Distribution in Each *Comedor*

Comedor	La Inmaculada	El Almendro	La Balanza	Santa Inés	Solidaridad
Price of meals for members	600	300	500	400	250
Price of meals for consumers	800	600	600	600	--
Minimum number of meals sold	50	62	62	71	54
Maximum number of meals sold	57	86	86	104	128
Minimum number of families to whom food was distributed	12	18	13	13	7
Maximum number of families to whom food was distributed	17	24	15	17	14

<sup>a</sup>Based on one random week during the month of August of 1989.  
Exchange rate 9 Intids to US\$1.

Table 5

Participation and Social Relationships by *Comedor*  
Participation and Mutual Help Among Neighbors

Comedor	La Inmaculada N=14	El Almendro N=9	La Balanza N=17	Santa Inés N=15	Solidaridad N=21
Participation has improved family relations	50%	89%	59%	63%	81%
Has improved relationships among neighbors	64%	67%	77%	81%	76%
Has increased mutual help among neighbors	57%	75%	78%	96%	86%

Table 6

Husbands' Attitudes Regarding Women's Participation

Comedor	La Inmaculada N=14	El Almendro N=9	La Balanza N=17	Santa Inés N=15	Solidaridad N=21
Approves of wife's participation	62%	57%	58%	92%	88%
Previously opposed participation but now approves	31%	43%	17%	46%	65%

Table 7

Husbands' Attitudes Regarding Women's Participation in *Comedores*

	Officers N=15	Members N=42	Consumers N=30
Says it is okay	N=12 80%	N=30 73.2%	N=20 66.7%
Used to be opposed but not any more	N=7 47%	N=18 43.9%	N=9 30%
Always approved of his wife's participation	N=5 33%	N=2 29%	N=11 36%
Is still opposed to her participation	N=3 20%	N=12 28.5%	N=10 33%

Table 8

Husbands' Attitudes Regarding Food

	Officers N=15	Members N=42	Consumers N=30
Likes the food	N=5 33%	N=19 46.3%	N=16 53.3%
Food is sufficient for him	N=5 33%	N=7 17.1%	N=23 76.7%

Table 9

Husband's Understanding and Participation in Domestic Chores Since Women Participate in *Comedores*

Comedor	La Inmaculada N=14	El Almendro N=9	La Balanza N=17	Santa Inés N=15	Solidaridad N=21
Husband is now more understanding	62%	44%	40%	33%	52%
Now husband helps more with domestic chores	31%	44%	13%	40%	33%
Participation causes problems with husband	62%	22%	13%	33%	10%

Table 10

Husbands' Understanding and Participation in Domestic Chores Since Participation in *Comedores*

	Officers N=15	Members N=42	Consumers N=30
Husband has a better understanding of wife's needs	N=7 46.7%	N=22 52.4%	N=13 43.4%
Husband helps more with domestic work	N=6 40%	N=13 31%	N=8 26.7%
Participation causes problems with husband	N=5 33.3%	N=11 26.2%	N=14 13.3%

Table 11

Self-Confidence, Political Participation, and  
Participation in Decision-Making Processes:  
Changes After Joining a *Comedor*

	Officers N=20	Members N=51	Consumers N=42
Has less fear of voicing opinion	N=15 75%	N=15 29.4%	N=3 8.8%
Attends community councils more often	N=8 40%	N=14 27.5%	N=4 11.8%
Participates in decision- making more often	N=8 40%	N=8 15.7%	N=2 5.9%

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