

Photos for the Tribune by Tiffany Woods

Mercedes Pablo (left) and Maria Salvador sort peppers for the week's menu at their shantytown's soup kitchen.

The path less traveled

Peru's decade of war and killing of men force women out of the kitchen and into the world

By Tiffany Woods

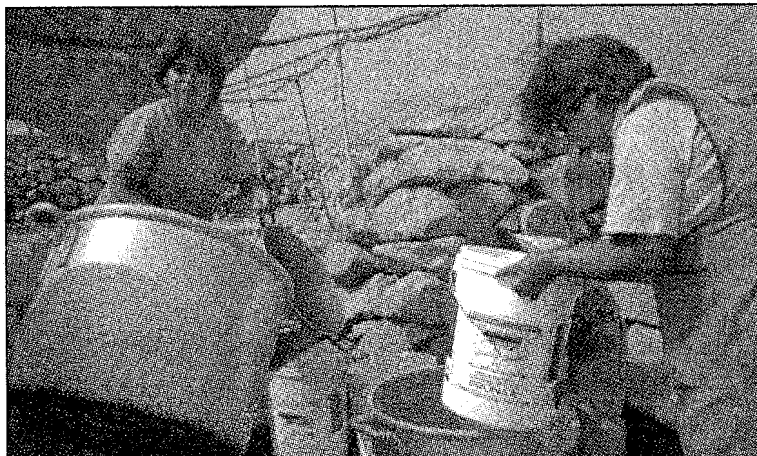
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

LIMA, Peru—Celia Mallqui's mother sent her to Lima when she was 19 because the terrorism was getting too dangerous around their home in the Peruvian Andes.

Nine years later, Mallqui, a single mother of three, is living in a dusty shantytown on the outskirts of the city. She is a co-director of a community soup kitchen, has furthered her education and cleans houses in Lima.

Mallqui's life, like those of many other Peruvian women, took a drastic turn in the last 10 years because of a situation over which they had little control: terrorism. Nearly 15 years of violence provoked by the communist Sendero Luminoso, or Shining Path, put thousands of women in charge of their families and communities as men were killed or went into hiding. Although women have achieved advances outside the home, they are still undervalued in their domestic roles, social workers say.

Sendero began to wreak havoc on the country in the 1980s. Its guerrilla



Volunteers clean up after a meal at a shantytown soup kitchen.

warfare is responsible for 25,000 deaths, according to the government. The violence has diminished significantly since the 1992 capture of party leader Abimael Guzman.

Before the violence began, the role of women in the highlands was unrecognized by society and by the women themselves, said Isabel Coral

Cordero, president of the Promotion and Population Development Center in Lima, which helps families displaced by terrorism. Women planted potatoes, watched over cows, cleaned house and took care of their children but saw themselves as an extension of their husbands. When talking to others, they referred to their hus-

bands as "*mi señor*" (my master) and asked *el señor* for permission in most matters.

The women lacked self-esteem, Cordero said.

"They say, 'I don't have eyes. I am blind because I watch but don't understand what I see. I don't have a brain because I am dumb because I don't know anything about what exists in the world. I am mute because I only speak Quechua,'" Coral said, recalling what the women told her.

That began to change when Sendero started killing villagers in the sierra. The rebels sought out the men, so the males either fled, disappeared, turned to self-defense or were killed. In the community of Ccegra, for example, the majority of the 40 families are headed by widows today. The removal of the men left an economic and social vacancy in families and the community. So women began to emerge out of necessity and became a source of stability.

"If you ask them, 'Why did you feel obligated to leave your house to search for alternatives to resolve this

Peru

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problem?" they will answer, "They killed my child, my husband, my parents," Coral said. "I had to go out not only to bury my dead, but to preserve the living. If I hadn't gone out, we would have died one by one, including myself."

Thousands of families fled to Lima's shantytowns. The city life altered the women forever and accelerated their social and personal changes. Women like Zenova Mitma, a mother of four who came to a Limeñan shantytown in 1984, helped found the community's soup kitchen despite being able to speak only her Indian language of Quechua. You can't be afraid of leadership positions or speaking poorly, she said.

Other women's progress was more subtle. Some, upon arriving in the city, were originally accompanied by their husbands in the smallest daily chores, such as walking to the bakery. But not anymore.

Sendero accelerated the transition from passive bystander to active community leader by targeting men and ignoring women, Cordero said. Consequently, women gained a greater liberty to leave their homes and find their voices in the streets.

The immediacy of the war also helped speed the transition. The women were affected directly, unlike in a war on foreign soil. They saw their husbands die, their crops destroyed and their villages abandoned. They had no choice but to do something.

They couldn't prevent or repair the destruction alone, so they began to organize. Coral repeated in a hushed but passionate voice what the women commonly said:

"The only thing I could do was look here, look there, and I discovered that I was not the only one that was living all these problems. Like me, these women were crying here, crying there because they didn't know what to do. So the idea came to us that if there are so many of us, why don't we work together? Although it will be our crying, it will be louder."

They discovered a solution in the public sector. They walked the streets of the cities, sat on the steps of police stations and used the mass media to voice their concerns. But above all, they created

'We want to share the duties and space with you, but there will not be a return to the kitchen.'

Mothers' Clubs, which represented the women politically and helped them with their day-to-day necessities. At the end of the-1970s in the Ayacucho region, located in Peru's southern Andes, there were 60 such clubs. Today there are 1,400, totaling 80,000 women. The women's solidarity has given them power.

On one occasion, the women in the Mothers' Clubs wanted to raise their flag in the plaza in the



Photo for the Tribune by Tiffany Woods

Isabel Arango (left) and Maria Santiago prepare green beans for a soup kitchen in Montenegro, a shantytown bordering Lima.

city of Ayacucho in a peace rally. But the police, watching nearby, opposed it. That didn't stop the women.

"The 1,400 Mothers' Clubs began to enter through the four corners of the plaza," Coral said, clearly touched by the memories. "And the police general said, 'Wow, you are very well organized.' And they continued entering and entering and entering. Five thousand, 7,000 women continued to enter. And the general stood up, 'No, no, no. That's enough. Close off the corners. This is very dangerous.' He didn't want them to raise the flag because he was scared to death."

Today, women have won basic human rights, bettered their self-esteem, increased their voice in

family matters, obtained positions of leadership in their communities and stopped calling their husbands "mi señor."

"But although women have an important part in initiating this new life, they are not valued within their home," said Raquel Reynoso, a social worker at Suyasun, an organization that helps displaced families. "Women are overloaded with all the chores. They not only have to take care of the children and worry about their food and education, but they have to go out and look for income."

Consequently, Peruvian society needs to evaluate women's roles now, Coral said.

"They had a big role during the war because they were filling a vacancy," she said. "But the protagonism of women needs to diminish. There was an overburdening of the woman, and they can't continue carrying everything."

But the readjustment might not be easy.

"They say, 'We have won this space,'" Coral said. "We have conquered this role. You are not going to take this away. We want to share the duties and space with you, but there will not be a return to the kitchen."

Coral told the story of a young community leader from the Ayacucho region who reflected on the changes that had occurred in her during the last few years.

"She said, 'I am happy to be a young woman because I thought I was dumb, but now looking back at what we have done, I realize that we are very valuable and intelligent,'" Coral said. "I myself admire my efforts. On the other hand, I feel compelled to continue showing how capable we are. We cannot stop here."