FEMINIST CURRENTS IN LATIN AMERICA

Participants in a basic course in the barrio El Planeta.
Credit: Photo archive of Movimiento Manuela Ramos

Liisa North

A partir d'entrevues qu'elle a faites auprès de féministes latino-américaines et de documents rassemblés à Lima (Pérou), à Quito (Equateur) et à Bogota (Colombie) en juillet-août 1984, Liisa North analyse les réalisations du mouvement féministe au cours de la dernière décennie, et les réactions qu'il a suscitées. Elle montre comment la recherche féministe, les cours de formation offerts par le centre Movimiento Manuela Ramos de Lima, *fondé en 1978, tout comme l'histoire de la vie de Rigoberta Menchu, paysanne indienne guatémaltèque, sont des exemples du féminisme à l'action. Elle conclut en disant que le mouvement féministe d'Amérique Latine, varié et dynamique, déploie ses premiers efforts pour améliorer la situation de la femme.*

This article is based on interviews with feminists and on material collected in Lima (Peru), Quito (Ecuador) and Bogotá (Colombia) during July-August 1984.

An energetic and creative feminist movement has emerged in Latin America during the last decade. What it still lacks in mass acceptance and in its capacity to change power structures, its members more than make up for by their commitment. They have generated a remarkable amount of debate and activity through the establishment of new feminist action centres. These centres provide legal aid services, organize courses, produce educational materials – often in cartoon form – for barely literate mass audiences, run journals and radio programs, and conduct research.

The initial public reaction to this activity ranged from derision to horror. Maruja Barrig, a well known Peruvian feminist and interim director of a Population Council financed research program on "Women, Low Income Households and Urban Services" in Lima, sums it up: "Feminism was satanized. Feminists were perceived as ugly, fat, frustrated, spinsters and/or lesbians." Virginia Vargas of the "Centre for the Peruvian Women, Flora Tristán" recalls how the media presented feminists as "crazy women who are out to destroy the family and want to be men." At home the reactions of fathers and brothers, husbands, sons and lovers provoked painful conflict and soul searching.

Olga Ampáro Sánchez, director of the "House of the Women" in Bogotá, Colombia, decided on divorce and found "greater tranquility" in her work and a freer kind of relationship with her children. A group of single or divorced professional women in Quito, Ecuador, described how they are creating their "own spaces for sociability" in defiance of the traditional Latin American women's maxim "Distrust your best friend."

Since the overwhelming majority of the feminist leaders are former activists connected to various socialist parties and movements, their decision to organize separately as women was most bitterly criticized by the political left. Feminists were accused of being divisionists, of introducing foreign *petit bourgeois* ideas irrelevant and damaging in the context of third world poverty and class oppression. The women responded by pointing out how the authoritarian male domination which permeates society was reproduced within the organizations of the left: "while the men led and theorized, the women were secretaries, served up the coffee and organized *fiestas* to fill the party's coffers."

The basic premise of the radical feminist position, as argued by Virginia Vargas, is that "in addition to the class contradiction inherent in capitalist society, there exists a contradiction between the sexes inherent in patriarchy." She continues:

> *Everyday, we confront other proposals which we consider partial, incomplete or insufficiently untied from the masculine point of view. Among them are those who advocate room for women within the existing structures, limiting their demands to incorporation into male time and space. We also find those who are convinced that the transformation of our situation will be accomplished with a transformation of the society; thus they stress the class contradiction. Within the logic of this perspective, women's oppression is of a secondary nature and, by obscuring its specificity in this way, the possibilities for action in the present are deactivated.*[1]

Within the variety of expressions that feminism has taken on, the activities of the "Movimiento Manuela Ramos" bridge the sex/class debate, and provide an

example of the vitality of recent developments. Self-consciously feminist, this women's centre organizes programs directed primarily toward the shanty towns and poorest *barrios* of Lima: "Manuela Ramos" is "Mary Smith": she is "everywoman."

The centre was founded by middle class women in 1978. With eight full and four half-time staff and nine volunteer *animateurs* from the *barrios*, "Manuela Ramos" now provides legal aid, publishes a bimonthly bulletin and educational leaflets, carries out action research, and organizes short training courses of two categories.

The first, called "basic courses," are carried out in the *barrios*. As one of the centre founders, Vicky Villanueva, explains, three concerns guide the course content: the discussion of feminist issues, the specific requests of the *barrio* women, and the need to promote women's organization in the poor neighbourhoods. The requests of the *barrio* women most often refer to their basic everyday needs – training in child care, health and sanitation problems and the like. They live in neighbourhoods where all the public services we take for granted are lacking or inadequate. Instead of turning on the tap, they may have to walk several blocks to carry water in pails from a spigot. Garbage collection, sewage systems, education facilities are either non-existent or unreliable. The need for women's organization and leadership is discussed with reference to these "household problems", as well as to the need for group cooking and eating facilities to ease individual burdens and combine indequate family resources.

Approximately four hundred women, ranging in age from fourteen to seventy, and from illiterates (twenty percent) to high school graduates (five percent), have participated in these courses. Some came despite the protest of husbands; often they were initially motivated by curiosity. Most course graduates express an increased sense of competence and self worth, as well as a capacity to articulate their needs:

- "I learned to organize my house work better . . . and now I have some time for myself to read and think which I did not do before."
- "I have learned to treat my daughter with great freedom . . . Before, I did not know how to raise her; I didn't want her to be like me. I now see her as a person, as little as she may be."
- "The relationship with my husband has improved a lot, in little things, taboos we had about sexual relations."

The second type of course is organized for *animateurs* at the "Movimiento's" cheerfully painted and decorated house in a mixed lower middle and working class neighbourhood near the centre of Lima. These courses are called "How are we and what do we want." In sixteen three-hour sessions, five themes are explored through group discussion: sexuality, the "revaluation" of women, their social status, historical roles, and personal and social alterntives. "The class issue is necessarily present" in both types of courses, argues Vicky Villanueva, "but our theoretical focus is on women – only if they learn to value themselves as women will they be able to secure a broader public role."

> ***"Rape by police and prison guards is also common in Peru."***

The work style at "Manuela Ramos" is collective, a conscious effort to create an alternative to the hierarchical organizational structures of the male-dominated political parties and unions in which many of the "Manuelas" had been activists. Gina Yañez, one of the three lawyers in the legal aid unit, could have pursued a traditional career: "But as I neared graduation, I asked myself what kind of a lawyer to I want to become? What can I do for myself and others? I felt myself to be a feminist. It is a life choice – a personal and professional commitment. Here I just work and work more but I'm with friends. I want to create a new kind of relationship between lawyer and client – they are also my friends."

Half of the cases Gina Yañez deals with involve child support. Rape by police and prison guards is also common in Peru. With these types of cases she was psychologically prepared to deal. But her confrontation with widespread violence and rape inside families – something "Manuela Ramos" had not been entirely aware of when it set up the legal service – was emotionally draining. She now points to the little rewards that compensate for her daily encounters with the "normality of violence" – like the woman who said she enrolled in one of the courses "in order to learn how not to physically abuse her children." Gina Yañez suspects that there is also more violence within middle class families than is generally acknowledged. The difference is that "the *barrio* women talk about it." As another "Manuela" points out, these women often begin by saying "I'm not a feminist, but . . ." And then comes the outpouring of angry complaints about male behaviour.

The dedication and hard work of the "Manuelas," "Floras" and other feminist groups in Lima, and the welcome given them by *barrio* and working class women, have earned them the respect, albeit often still grudging, of the politicians and labour leaders who had criticized them so harshly. The effectiveness of their programs and activities over the past few years have begun to dispel some of the original negative perceptions. Signs of change are also appearing in media coverage.

Simultaneously, women who explicitly differentiate themselves from "middle class feminists" are raising their voices. At the last 1983 Congress of the Peasant Federation of Peru, one of the two major peasant leagues in the country, the *campesina* delegates refused to accept the offer of two positions on the executive committee and a half-hour limitation on their women's reports – scheduled to conclude a long day agenda. With shouts of "down with *machismo*", they obtained five executive positions and unlimited time for presenting their case to an astounded male majority which they kept awake for this purpose until the early hours of the morning.

A decision not to organize separately was also made by Guatemalan Indian peasant women. In a remarkable personal account of the genocidal repression taking place in her homeland, Rigoberta Menchú, a nationally famous Quiché leader now in exile, relates:

> *We women* compañeras *came to the conclusion (because for a time we thought of creating an organization for women) that it was paternalistic to say there should be an organization for women when in practice women work and are exploited as well. Women work picking coffee and cotton, and on top of that, many women have taken up arms and even elderly women are fighting night and day; so it isn't possible to say that now we're setting up an organization so that women can rebel, work or study women's problems. It won't always*

Women's march for water in Lima, Peru.
Credit: Photo archive of Movimiento Manuela Ramos

be like this, of course. That is just the situation we are facing at the moment. Perhaps in the future, when there's a need for it, there will be a women's organzation in Guatemala. For the time being, though, we think that it would be feeding machismo *to set up an organization for women only, since it would mean separating women's work from men's work.*[2]

Rigoberta Menchú's story of her life is a shocking document on the class, ethnic and sexist exploitation of the system against which she decided to rebel. After working as a migrant cotton picker since early childhood, witnessing the effects of the aerial spraying of pesticides over fields full of workers, and the abuses of the landlords (one of her friends was literally hacked to pieces for refusing the sexual advances of a plantation owner's son), she took a job as a maid in the capital city. "When I saw the family dog's food – bits of meat, rice, things the family ate – and they gave me a few beans and hard *tortillas*, that hurt me very much. The dog had a good meal and I did not deserve as good a meal as the dog." She objected to having to teach the adolescent males of the family "how to do the sexual act" (a bit of extra pay was offered), and finally returned to her native village.

There, in the late seventies, the Indian peasants were beginning to organize for self-defence against army incursions in search of guerillas. Entire villages had been razed to the ground. To organize themselves, Rigoberta Menchú's community, together with the discussion of the orally transmitted history of Indian resistance against the Spanish conquest, "began to study the Bible as our main text:"

Many relationships in the Bible are like those we have with our ancestors . . . We began looking for texts which represented each one of us. We tried to relate them to our Indian culture. We took the example of Moses for the men, and we have the example of Judith, who was a very famous woman in her time . . . She fought very hard for her people and made many attacks against the King they had then, until she finally had his head. She held her victory in her hand, the head of the King. This gave us a vision, a stronger idea of how we Christians must defend ourselves. It made us think that a peole could not be victorious without a just war . . . I am a Christian and I participate in this struggle as a Christian . . . They say: "Indians are poor because they don't work." But I know from experience that we're ready outside for work at three in the morning. It was this that made us decide to fight . . . our reality teaches us that, as Christians, we must create a Church of the poor, that we don't need a Church imposed from the outside which knows nothing of hunger.

In fact, the study of the Bible as a text for liberation among the poor and oppressed has become a widespread phenomenon in many countries of Latin America. In this respect, the Latin Americans – both men and women – are way ahead of us in the revaluation of traditional Christian values.

Rigoberta Menchú expresses the Guatemalan Indian peasants' common struggle against class and ethnic oppression; she decides that Indian women should not create separate organizations. She does so in spite of the realization that "wherever you care to name, *machismo* still exists. The whole world is afflicted with this sickness." In Lima Virginia Vargas articulates the secular feminist philosophy of "Flora Tristan"

and emphasizes the need for separate organization. Both women have made conscious choices responding to their different cultural, social, political and religious experiences. And both choices demand our respect.

The variety of women's responses in Latin America reflects the variety of the region: every country is different and no country is homogeneous. But in every country something new is germinating. In Ecuador, the new consciousness has led to the republication of the first novel written in the country – it dealt with women's oppression! First published in serialized form in a Quito newspaper in 1863, *La Emancipada* is now available as an inexpensive paperback. "Flora Tristan's" research on women's roles in Inca society has led to the discovery that, in addition to Mama Ocllo (the mother earth), Mama Huaco (the woman warrior) was important in their cultural tradition. Women are discovering their history while sponsoring a wide variety of research on their contemporary situation – ranging from women's electoral behaviour[3] to the actual sources of family incomes in poor neighbourhoods.[4] In Bogota, "The House of the Woman," a strongly feminist centre, is receiving more requests – for the organization of seminars, presentations in high schools, the provision of legal aid – than it can possible satisfy. Feminist activity is not limited to capital cities. Centres and discussion/working groups are appearing in provincial towns.

To be sure, these are all pioneering efforts. But women's questions are now on the agenda of broad public debate in Latin America.

---

[1]"Movimiento Feminista en el Perú: Balance y Perspectivas" (Lima: "Flora Tristan" mimeo, May 1984).

[2]*I . . . Rigoberta Menchú, An Indian Women in Guatemala*, Ed. Elizabeth Burgos-Debray (London: Verso Editions and NLB, 1984).

[3]For example, a research project sponsored jointly by the Casa de la Mujer, the Centro de Planificación y Estudios Sociales (CEPLAES), and the Instituto de Estudios de la Familia in Quito, Ecuador. CEPLAES is also sponsoring action research projects on women to promote their autonomous organization.

[4]One of the activities of "Manuela Ramos" in Lima, Peru.

Liisa North is associate professor of Political Science and a Fellow of the Center for Research on Latin America and the Caribbean (CERLAC) at York University. She has published on various aspects of Latin American politics, including civil-military relations and popular movements. Her most recent book is Bitter Grounds: The Roots of Revolt in El Salvador.

ILLUSIONS

Intricate webs sparkle
in the morning sun,
their glistening threads
billowing out
like rainbow sails
before a gentle breeze.

Illusory
images that belie
the ravaged leaves left
veined and rattling
against branches
and each other.

Leaf passive
we
allow ourselves to be
entwined and enmeshed in
the apathies and conventions
of our daily life,
never counting the cost
until we are faced,
aghast,
with
our own
desolation.

Judy Johnson
Winnipeg, Manitoba

THE NECKLACE

These brief hours
rest and glow in our hands
a moment.
But then,
like colored beads
from a broken necklace,
they slip through our fingers,
roll away,
hesitate
on the edge
of time
then drop out of sight
into the dim corners
of our crowded lives.

Florence Tormey
Montreal, Quebec