

Coping with Structural Adjustment

Women's Organizing in Peru

by Ana Isla

Cet article explore les politiques d'harmonisation structurelle au Pérou, et explique comment ces politiques contribuent à l'exploitation de ce pays,

Capitalist expansion has been experienced as a destructive unilateral force in the life of Peruvians.

particulièrement dans les bidonvilles de Lima où les femmes font souvent partie d'une main d'œuvre non ou sous rémunérée. L'auteure se concentre sur deux programmes de survie et la

façon dont ces programmes ont un rapport avec le féminisme populaire.

The enforced repayment of debts imposed on Third World countries through the Stabilization and the Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs)¹ implemented by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank (WB) involve the dispossession of individuals, communities, countries, and entire continents of the resources necessary for their daily survival. This article will focus on Peru as an example and build links first, on the exploitation of the country and its inhabitants as conditions of production,² particularly the unwaged and poorly waged labour that women perform in the shantytowns of Lima. Second, I will sketch survival programs—*vaso de leche* (glass of milk) and *comedores populares* (popular kitchens)—and their relation to popular feminism. Finally, I will describe how these programs work in Villa El Salvador.

Peruvian Debt Crisis

Peruvian economic history during the twentieth century has been characterized by the increasing export of sugar, cotton, and minerals. Oil and copper dominated during the first

decades; cotton, gold, zinc, and lead after the 1929 economic crash; and fish meal during the 1950s and 1960s. As a raw material producer, Peru was closely linked to the international market. Compared with other Latin American countries, Peru's industrial development was retarded because its development was based on exports by foreign investors and no industrial base emerged.

Foreign capital was a crucial element. The pillage by the export sector exhausted raw materials and created a symbiotic relationship between foreign capital and the Peruvian elite, who played the role of minor shareholder. Peru has amassed substantial debts through the export of profits, military spending, and irrelevant but costly infrastructure programs. Furthermore, Peru's integration with the unregulated private global markets encouraged an increase in net foreign public and private indebtedness, with an increased portion of this debt of a short-term nature and thus highly sensitive to changed expectations on the part of foreign money managers. High interest rates have thus strangled Peruvian government SAPs as well as the economy. Peru has never faced such a prolonged crisis as the one which began in 1975 and which continues today.

Since 1975, when the debt crisis arose, capitalist expansion has been experienced as a relentless and destructive unilateral force in the life of Peruvians. Peru adopted structural adjustment policies in 1976, 1983, 1985, 1987, 1988, 1990, and 1996. By 1985, 41 per cent of Peruvians were living in poverty and 11.5 per cent lived in extreme poverty in 1986 (Huaman).

In August 1990, the Fujimori Cabinet called upon the IMF and WB to restructure Peru's economy (in order to pay the interest on the debt). In this context, restructuring implies setting up a new model of accumula-

tion, new patterns of investment and saving, new income distribution, and the creation of capital in new ways. The program for Peru was based on standard neo-classical dogma formulated by the IMF and WB without regard to national conditions. The aim of the IMF program was to refinance Peru's multilateral debt, while the aim of the WB was to conclude the dismantling of health and education programs.

As a result of the 1990 policies inflation rose to 397 per cent; consequently, consumer expenditures fell 31 per cent the first month of the programs' application (Frederick Ebert Foundation). By the end of 1990 wages had fallen 23 per cent at the national level, and 62 per cent in the public sector; the average wage represented 32 per cent of the cost of a typical family food basket. Poverty grew from seven million in July 1990 to 12 million in August 1990. By 1994, 49.6 per cent of the population lived under the poverty line, of which 20 per cent lived in extreme poverty concentrated in the rural areas. The income gap has increased 12 times over the last five years. In 1995, 49.6 per cent of Peruvians living on less than U.S.\$5 a day received 12.4 per cent of the national income; while the richest 20 per cent received 54.3 per cent. The poverty rate increased 8.6 points over 1985. For Lima's population extreme poverty increased from 37.2 per cent to 39.7 per cent, between 1994 to 1996 (Webb).

Income levels are similar to what they were 30 years ago. Real buying power has decreased by 64 per cent over the past decade. Three million Peruvians have joined the ranks of the poor since 1985 with near half the population unable to meet basic needs in terms of health, education, and nutrition. (Howard)

The ambitious plan of "stabilization" could not be achieved without an appropriate political framework; that is, without a state devoted to repressing those sectors which stood to lose the most from

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this financial greed—the poor, indigenous peoples, and women.

Conditions of production

The IMF and WB policies push Peruvians deeper into the international market as a condition of production (to further subsidize the cost of the industrial production in the North). This is achieved through cuts in public expenditure, real wages, and consumption. The perception of Peruvians as conditions of production is regarded by the government, as an economic "advantage" in exporting the country's products.

In December 1994 the cost of the basic food basket for a family of five was U.S.\$343.00 per month in metropolitan Lima. This basket is based on a family intake of approximately 12,000 calories. The minimum salary of U.S.\$60 per month is barely enough to buy the little food they require to function as "workers." This exploitation of Peruvians is based not only on the appropriation of the surplus labour (by capitalism) but the appropriation of the health and lives of the workers. As workers are considered dispensable (and can be replaced anytime by millions like them), they have no alternative but to work for the minimum salary imposed by the IMF. Theoretically, the minimum salary should be able to cover essential needs. Like anyone else, Peruvians have to pay rent, put food on the table, pay energy and water, pay for school, health care, and transporta-

tion. But, when inflation is high, as it is in Peru, the minimum salary is not enough to buy food.

A person who lives on a minimum salary does not eat well, often has to travel several hours to get to the workplace, works nine hours daily, sleeps badly. They cannot participate in community life, do not have access to information, do not have time to worry about world issues, and are disenfranchised.

However, the tourniquet imposed by the IMF on the minimum salary is not enough to satisfy the banking system and after every evaluation that the model doesn't work, the minimum salary is targeted as being an inflationary factor and a new reduction is imposed.

Peruvian women's adjustment

Cuts in basic services increase women's responsibilities in the provision of food, clean water, education, health care, elder care, housing, garbage collection, house building. They work more and eat less.

Women's response to SAPs has been multidimensional. Girls between 10 and 14 are members of the paid workforce. In 1970, they constituted four per cent of workers. In 1985 this figure increased to 7.9 per cent (Statistical Yearbook). The number of women in the workforce over 45 years of age has decreased substantially. Therefore, older women tend to find shelter in the informal sector where wages are even lower, exploitation is unchecked, work is high risk and labour protection, minimum wages, and social security are non-existent.

For Peruvian women, the situation has become untenable. Of 1.5 million Peruvians who left the country since the beginning of the debt crisis, 56 per cent are female.

With the debt crisis Official Development Assistance (ODA) funds have

increased northern's NGOs participation in Peru. These NGOs sometimes alleviate the worst effects of the IMF-WB programs by enforcing a sexual division of labour. For instance, through the provision of credits, some poor women can engage in various kinds of handicraft production. Nevertheless, their work is tied to the requirements of the market in the northern hemisphere.

Low-income women's battle

The economic crisis has, however, generated an unprecedented level of women's participation, and new forms of social organization are arising, in particular among low-income women struggling to help their families survive.

Nearly half of Lima's population lives in *barriadas* (shantytowns) that are a result of squatter invasions by poor migrant farmers during the '70s. A growing number of poor households in the *barriadas* of Lima are rural inmigrants headed by women.

Almost every woman who has participated in the establishment of a *barriada* settlement, or *toma de tierra*,

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has a story to tell that reflects her courage and determination to survive. Many shantytown dwellers died trying to escape the police who beat and arrested the leaders of the *toma de tierra*. Often the women's ability to fight for their lives helped in the establishment of a *barriada*. If they succeeded in the struggle, they were assigned building spaces and houses

made out of *esteras* or mats.

The dwellers' primary concerns are water, sewage disposal, and transportation. As such, neighbourhood organizing becomes a way of survival and women's participation is crucial. At first, women who came to neighbourhood meetings expecting the men to assume leadership roles rarely spoke. They were hesitant to express their ideas, fearing the men's ridicule. Young people who lived with their

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families in the *barriadas* while attending university became involved in political parties of the left and played an important role in urging women to participate actively in the neighbourhood. They taught individual women how to read and write, prepare documents, as well as to organize public presentations. They also helped women stand up under family pressure and ridicule from men as well as supported them when they took radical positions and assumed leadership of neighbourhood campaigns. This organizing process went on in every *barriada* neighbourhood, creating a tremendous threat to the central government (Andreas).

Women living in shantytowns

Women in the *barriadas* have to take up either domestic service, slave in a sweatshop, or work from their homes in order to assure their family's survival. They are not protected by labour laws, are often isolated, paid less, and used as a source of surplus, cheap labour.

Mothers have to feed, clothe, and shelter their families on less than half of what the government declares to be the minimum wage. Migrant women know that families like theirs stroll the streets looking for garbage or rotten fruit. A mother who lives in a shantytown will wake up at 5:00 a.m. leaving her children at home alone, sometimes taking them along, to spend most of her daylight hours

selling goods, services, or food on the streets. In addition, she must do piecework in her home to add to the family income. For instance, as well as washing her family's clothing by hand, she may take in the washing of others. These women often succumb to tuberculosis, rheumatism, or pneumonia. If a woman is lucky enough to have a husband employed in a factory, she is expected to bring his lunch to him at his workplace (Andreas).

Funding for public education has been virtually eliminated. One million children of school age are not going to school. Children who go to public school do not learn how to read or write because children are undernourished and frequently attend school after a long day at work. Furthermore, the quality of education has fallen dramatically (economic adjustment measures have driven teachers to poverty. They are one of the groups living in extreme poverty earning U.S. \$108.00 monthly (Webb 1996). In order to survive, the majority of teachers teach two shifts and drive taxis, leaving them little or no time to prepare for classes); therefore, their students cannot find a job after leaving school and are reduced to begging or becoming prostitutes. Consequently, sending children to school is difficult now that parents have to pay fees for tuition, school uniforms, and books. Families are thus forced to choose which members can do to school. Young girls are at a disadvantage because there is a belief that girls will marry soon and have children; consequently they won't be part of the workforce.

Housewives who demand better living conditions are often accused of neglecting their families. Conservative neighbours and government and church pressure them to stop *haciendo politica* (agitating). A husband may punish his wife physically. Family networks that have helped her to survive in the city after migration (from the countryside) may not continue to help her when she finds herself involved into wider community affairs. Fearing government re-

prisal, relatives will accuse her of "wasting her time" and of threatening the personal advancement of family members.

Despite the harsh realities, women of the *barriadas* have become a major social force preserving life, and encouraging other women to participate in change. Women have been politically active in strikes, marches, unions, federations, land invasion, guerrilla movements, and migration and they have improved the lives of their families through their collective survival struggles (Andreas).

Vaso de leche and comedores populares

The elimination of state social programs and the removal of subsidies in the food system brought together more than 100,000 women as organizers of neighbourhood committees and *comedores populares* (popular kitchens) as well as the municipal program *el vaso de leche* (glass of milk).

Women in the shantytowns, together with Catholic nuns and members of left-wing student and cultural organizations, organized the *Asociación Femenina en Defensa y Promoción de la Mujer* whose major accomplishment was the establishment of *comedores populares*. The *comedores populares* are community-based dining halls that have become meeting places since the introduction of SAPs in the late 70s. *Comedores populares* answer survival needs.

In 1991 Care Peru counted 5,329 *comedores populares* in Lima. Each *comedor popular* is composed of 20 families. Every week each family contributes a sum of money that is considerably less than what it would spend for food if cooked at home. Families also contribute with utensils such as cooking pots, large spoons, kerosene burners, and funnels. Housewives meet weekly to decide who will go to the market, and at whose home the food will be cooked. Parents and children bring their own plates and utensils to the kitchen and usually return to their own homes to eat their meals.

As the crisis in Peru deepened,

these programs were supported by services and training provided by the private sector, cooperatives, NGOs, churches, political parties, and northern-based development organizations. The government itself became directly involved in setting up large popular kitchens in those *barriadas* where pressure was greatest, such as in Villa El Salvador. By 1984, it was becoming more common for neighbourhood groups to attain a permanent locale, even if this meant taking over part of a church, school, or a clinic.

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Vaso de Leche (Glass of Milk) was part of the *Plan de Emergencia de Alimentación y Salud* (Emergency food and health plan) organized by the leftist municipal government, in 1984. However, since 1989 women's organizations have coordinated the program. Women were in charge of the distribution of milk for every child in their school area. For Peruvian children a daily glass of milk is vital, because it means staying alive. (This program is described using Villa El Salvador' case).

Some popular kitchens are autonomous, with no dependence on donors, but the majority receive food supplies from U.S. A.I.D. which channels agro-export products from U.S. farmers, through churches such as CARITAS-Catholics and OFASA (Seventh Day Adventist).

Women's unity in the *barriadas*, perceived as a political movement, was undermined by U.S. food relief programs—CARITAS and OFASA—which pressed women to support government policies (i.e., the SAPS already in place in Peru). Since over two-thirds of the income of shantytown dwellers goes to food, they become dependent on relief provisions and are obliged to comply with the conditions the sponsors of these relief programs impose.

To receive the food provided by the OFASA program, women must

work, from four to six hours daily in a job program which might include building parks, schools, and houses, or removing garbage from the streets. The value of the food received gives women a "salary"—approximately half the minimum wage (U.S.\$26 monthly)—without benefits. Furthermore, the work keeps women isolated under the threat that they will not get their food allotments if they become involved in politics. OFASA's definition of politics includes building clinics and health services for the neighbourhood.

The Mothers' Club sponsored by CARITAS started a three-month probationary period for members during which troublemakers could be weeded out. Relief organizations withheld food from the neighbourhoods and the women involved in protesting the abuse of public programs. According to Andreas both of these aid programs were designed to stop the independent organization of women.

With the implementation of "antiterrorist" laws in 1982 every Peruvian is under suspicion. The government strategy based on mass repression, indiscriminate detention, and system impunity (Kevin) victimized many *comedores populares* leaders. Many *comedores populares* leaders have been accused, imprisoned, and killed by both the government and the Shining Path (guerrilla movement).

Up to 1985, women had a limited perception of their oppression. As they, however, became engaged in a collective activity that helped assure their collective survival on a daily basis, women also became aware of their common problems. As *comedores populares* changed the community's organization dynamics, discussion on women's life conditions began.

Flora Tristan and Manuela Ramos Centers (local feminist NGOs) became involved in the *comedores populares* in 1986. Through workshops and theatre productions they helped raise the consciousness of women about their own conditions in the home, about abuse and violence, family relations, legal rights, reproductive rights, wom-

en's organizing and organizations, etc. In some of the neighbourhoods, women's common experience has strengthened the community and male abusers are confronted openly by female groups.

Through participation in discussion, women developed new capacities and insights, and the strength to resist outside pressure against their organizations. Moreover, women learned through their organizations that the problems they face are common to poor women everywhere, and that they are not insoluble.

Popular feminism

Victims of the "development" process, women are fighting state policies which exclude them, resisting SAPS, seeking short-term survival, creating alternatives for protection, while at the same time dismantling the patriarchal relations that support the repressive system. Out of the combination of economic needs and male repression popular feminism arose.³ This process built new identities and solidarities. Women's organizations became crucial for the family and community. In order to survive, they moved from politics by representation to direct politics. They assumed leadership roles and be-

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came important political activists. Their ability to act politically was central to their struggle for the right to have their basic needs met, as well as to their resistance against male repression: governments and husbands (Andreas).

Husbands' behaviour follows the machismo norms profoundly embedded in Peruvian society. How-

ever, "machismo" doesn't stop them from enjoying the benefits their households receive from women's near-clandestine activity in survival groups, i.e., Mothers' Clubs organized in almost all of the peasant communities to distribute food aid. The clubs are not included in the traditional community structure and men have shown no interest in their activities. Only one of six male residents interviewed in a southern Lima

ing the "Fujimorazo"⁴ (Portillo).

In Peru, as in Argentina, this interaction has changed the concept of motherhood and its location in the private and public spheres. The new motherhood challenges the isolation and fragmentation of women in households, fosters the capacity to act in public, and promotes the development of autonomous women's organizations (Shmukler). Survival needs created new spaces for women's action that while centered on traditionally female tasks—particularly cooking—also enabled women to name and resist the existence of domination in personal relations with men, the unequal distribution of tasks and responsibilities in the home, and their limited decision making power in both the private and the public sphere (Arteaga).

Some women in these organizations have transformed their family relations and are able to transfer their autonomy and sense of efficacy to experiences outside the home and to defend these gains openly. Mutual support and collective action increased women's appreciation of each other. This enabled women to develop collective actions with other women and resulted in such changes as the participation of

increased politization of the women and the family is clear. Family groups are developing more egalitarian gender practices and modernizing their conception of femininity and masculinity. The changes have resulted in some degree of freedom for women from cultural assumption of domesticity and isolation (Stromquist). Because poor women are locked in a terrible battle against the state in Peru, while at the same time making conscious efforts to improve their own situation relative to men, they are in a position to push forward the cause of all Peruvian women.

Villa El Salvador

Villa El Salvador is a town recognized nationally and internationally for its organization, participation, and struggle. Where the town now stands used to be barren sandy land. It is now a living neighbourhood of 300,000 people where more than half are under 25 years old.

Women in Villa El Salvador have shown effective ways of political participation. Women haven't stopped at denunciation. They have combined struggle with participation, and with proposing solutions to every problem. Both the *comedores populares* and *vaso de leche* have helped women to move out of the private household to a public and communal sphere. In these committees, women discuss issues of survival, social, and communal conflicts as well as personal and gender problems such as violence in their home.

Hand in hand with the food programs and the questioning of poverty, women started questioning their role. Education and self-esteem were promoted. In 1983 La Federación Popular de Mujeres de Villa El Salvador (Fepomuves) was organized. The Federation included 70 Mothers' Clubs, each representing 384 families. The Federation increased women's participation levels. Campaigns on human rights and women's rights became important components of the organization. In addition, workshops in garment making were organized to



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slum acknowledged that women performed "meritorious" work in the grassroots social organizations. Yet they all said they had enjoyed meals provided for low-income people at *comedores populares* run by these women.

A great deal of men still believe that women's participation in the organizations "seems like a waste of time," but, the majority acknowledged that "the Mothers' Clubs, and especially the *comedores populares*, kept them from dying of hunger dur-

women in neighbourhood communities, basic needs mobilizations, and human rights demonstrations. These changes, in turn, allowed women to gain authority within the household. These women modified their relations with their spouses and showed signs of higher self-esteem (Barrig). The husbands of the women leaders are showing new supportive behaviour, as these women are successfully renegotiating household authority. The machismo is reformed and it is less repressive. The trend toward an

generate income for the community. To improve women's health, campaigns of education and communication were held. Femopuves is the only experience in Lima which consolidates the women's movement.

In 1983 a local government was installed in Villa El Salvador, however, women didn't have representation until 1989 even though they were recognized by the municipal government as an important force. When political parties became conscious of women's strength, they were invited to participate as candidates. Maria Elena Moyano⁵ (member of Villa El Salvador community) was elected to the *teniente alcalde* (city council) of Villa el Salvador in 1989, as member of the Izquierda Unida (Left Party). Her management gave women's federations the ability to operate programs independently, such as the *vaso de leche*, established the basis for equal pay for equal work, organized women owners of small business to become part of the industrial park of the community, and organized campaigns for women's health and people's health.

Moyano worked hard for the recognition of women's work in the community as well as for women's representation in decision-making. She organized a commission to study women's experiences: in particular, how women survive in Villa El Salvador. The Commission's aim was to stop the manipulation by government and church of the food program and to come up with a development plan.

In Villa El Salvador, the women's federation was in charge of the *vaso de leche* program. There were 1,500 committees. Only the milk was donated, but the women added pots, spoons, sugar, cinnamon, and cloves. During the First Convention of the *Vaso de Leche*, in 1986, it was proposed that the program should be directed by a committee organized by women. At that time *vaso de leche* programs were controlled by CARITAS, which Moyano called a macho and authoritarian institution. In 1987 Fepomuves, with 105 Mothers' Clubs and 450 *vaso de*

leche coordinators, took over the direction of the program. They created eight collection centres to distribute milk. Every collection centre serves 15 to 20 neighbourhoods of 60 mothers and every neighbourhood had four *vaso de leche* committees. The program offered women experience in organization, co-management, and methods of evaluation. Until 1994, women's struggles successfully stopped governments that tried to cut the *vaso de leche* budget.

The *comedores populares* in Villa El Salvador started in September 1984, and in Maria Elena Moyano's words, it was "to give answer to hunger, unemployment, and misery." In Villa El Salvador there are more than 800 *comedores*. There are different types of *comedor popular*, but most popular are the family *comedores*. In this type, 12 families meet to organize the weekly food sharing. Every family pays a portion of the costs and a couple of families are in charge of providing the daily food needed. At the end of the week, the family members evaluate the relationship between the families and the food they share. At the political level they discuss why prices are going up, and why governments do nothing for them (Tupac).

Conclusion

In the past as well as in the present, the expanded reproduction of capital has fed on the colonization of Third World (nature and people), nature and women. There is no colonization without violence. This violence is not gender-neutral and it is basically directed against women, particularly against Third World country women. Women as a condition of production are fundamental to the fabric of capitalist society. In this capacity women have been added to the economy as a "free good." Women's work makes accumulation possible and the "surplus" women generate is quite crucial to the operation of capitalist patriarchy (Mies 1991).

The application of the IMF (stabilization) and the WB (structural adjustment) programs raised the Pe-

ruvian's poverty levels. By 1996 almost half of the population cannot satisfy their basic material needs. Poor Peruvians are seen as a threat and are dispossessed of their basic human rights. To challenge poverty, women created survival programs: *comedores populares* and *el vaso de leche*. The success of these initiatives is due to Peruvian women's courage for taking responsibility to create the necessary conditions for life. They created new forms of participation in terms of the process, planning, and decision-making. Women understand that their personal survival, as well as their family's, depends on their own capacity for community organization.

The collective survival work created conditions for the emergence of a popular feminism. It forged new identities and solidarities, transformed family relations, and enabled the transfer of women's new autonomy and sense of efficacy to experiences outside the home and to defend these gains openly. Villa El Salvador is a clear example of women's successful organizing to assure their needs of their children and families.

With further development of neoliberal policies, food "donated" by aid programs are reduced and/or are used to promote micro-enterprises (Ortiz). By the end of 1996, both programs—the *vaso de leche* and the *comedores populares*—have been taken away from women's control by the municipal governments.

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¹Both stabilization and structural adjustment programs are designed to put countries on a path to "sustainable development" by improving their foreign investment climate through elimination of trade and investment regulations, boosting foreign exchange earnings through export promotion, and reducing government deficit through cuts in spending.

²Conditions of production are those things not produced as commodities in accordance with the laws of the market (law of value), but which are treated as if they are commodities. The existence of capitalism rests on the exploitation of these conditions of production. According to Marx, there are three conditions of production: human labour power, the environment, and urban infrastructure (general, communal conditions of production). The "fictitious" price of labour power is the wage rate, and that of the environmental and urban infrastructure and space is rent.

Feminists and Latin American Dependents have added women and colonies (indigenous peoples and nature) as conditions of production. In neoclassic theory neither women nor colonies have value, therefore they have no fictitious price. Women's labour is a "free good" and colonies (indigenous peoples and nature) are "free resources."

Women's work (life-producing and life-preserving) appears as a "free good" or as free resource, like air, water, sunshine. It appears to flow "naturally" from women's body. "Housewifization" of women is a parallel process to the proletarianization of men (Mies).

³Popular feminism are feminists who are not funded from outside sources and who recognize that class, gender, and race are the determinants in their life. They are part of the ongoing neighbourhood and community struggles in Peru. Coined in 1982 by poor women during the II Latin American Feminist Encuentro in Lima, this concept express a new spirit of combativeness emerging with clarity and force.

⁴Fujimorazo is the structural adjustment programs imposed, in 1990, during the Fujimori period.

⁵Maria Elena Moyano was the organizing secretary of the Federacion Popular de Mujeres de Villa EL Salvador in 1980 and president for two terms: 1986-1988. Elected *teniente alcaldesa* (city councillor) of Villa El Salvador in 1989, she was killed by Shining Path in 1992.

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