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Grassroots Participation and Feminist Gender Identities: A case study of women from the popular sector in Metropolitan Lima, Peru

By Beatriz Padilla¹

Abstract

As women become active in grassroots organizations, they assume gender consciousness that generally leads them to adopt or experience “feminist gender identities,” which is illustrated with ethnographic material collected in Lima, Peru. I also provide a summary of the latest historical development in Peru as a framework to locate the activism of poor women as a new phenomenon arising with the “globalization crises” or the Lost Decade for Latin America. While I frame the study of women’s participation as part of social movement theory, I challenge and re-interpret traditional approaches to the study of women’s involvement and activities.

Key Words: women’s participation, feminist identities, gender consciousness

Introductionⁱⁱ

During the last 30 years, the women’s movement (or movements) has become one of the most relevant expressions of social movements in Latin America. Through protest, community organizing and social mobilization, women became key players in periods of crisis and change. One distinguishing feature of the women’s movement, especially for women of the popular sector, has been the increasing involvement of women in the so-called “women’s popular organizations” as a strategy of struggle. New Social Movement theory has emphasized the formation of submerged networks, the formation of collective identities and the relevance of the adopted strategies, but most of the explanations given have focused on Western examples. Thus the application of New Social Movement theory to a specific case of the women’s movement in Latin America would make a contribution to the study of gender, especially to understand how poor women organize, what the consequences are at the personal level, and what changes activism brings to their lives.

Some scholars simply stress the diversity of new social interests and demands, while others focus on the failure of the existing institutions and structures to cope with change in Latin America (Escobar and Alvares: 1992; Laraña et al. 1994). Further research is needed in order to provide a closer look and explanation to the phenomena, bridging social movements’ theory and gender theory. Social movements are gendered, as the institutions and governmental agencies with whom they relate to are also gendered. By looking at some expressions of social movements, it is possible to assess their diversity and gender socialization. The Mothers of Plaza de Mayo, for example, are not just a movement but a women’s movement, and they were successful in confronting the military not as a movement, or any social movement, but as a women’s and mothers’ movement. An analysis of them as a movement that excludes gender would certainly miss the point.

In this paper, I explore women’s participation in popular organizations during the 1990s, and how their participation and engagement in those organizations is related to the process of gender identities formation. I want to investigate whether or not poor women experience, as they become involved in local organizations, a process of empowerment that feeds their self-esteem influencing the formation of feminist gender identity/ies.

As a first step, the theoretical framework at the macro level, incorporates general principles of social movement theory to include the participation of women in the popular sector as a manifestation of new social movements. At the micro level, my focus on gender challenges but also redefines two analytical dichotomies traditionally used in gender analysis. One is the domestic-public spheres dichotomy, commonly used by scholars in the analysis of women's activities. The other differentiates between strategic and practical interests as a way to judge whether organizations possess a gender (feminist) orientation or not.

In the second part of this paper, I summarize social and political events that had impacted the mobilization of poor women in Latin America, particularly in Peru. Primary emphasis is placed on time and space: the development of events in the 1990s focusing on the locality, in this case the "*pueblos jóvenes*" (shantytowns) of Metropolitan Lima. In the third section, I present a case study based on fieldwork completed in Lima during the summer of 1997 in several shantytowns of Lima, Perú. It includes a brief description of the study and the methodology used to gather the ethnographic data. Finally, I analyze the collected data, the women's "voices," in light of my own experience and the theoretical frameworks specified above.

The ethnographic data I obtained points out that the women who are actively involved in popular organizations gain gender consciousness which, through activism, leads them to developing feminist gender identities. As they become aware of gender inequalities and somehow try to do something to change those inequalities, they become feminist or adopt feminist identities. One word about the meaning of "feminist:" Feminist in this context does not carry the same meaning as usually understood in the feminist movement, nor would most of these women call themselves feminist. I qualify them as feminist because some of the aims of their activism is to change the patriarchal society in which they live and because they are not only aware of gender inequality but they also try to do something about it. Thus feminist identity is a label given by the researcher and not freely adopted by the researched.

Theoretical Framework

Theorists of social movements have stated that groups of people act in very diverse ways as these forms of collective behavior or mobilization may take different manifestations. Jelin (1986) states that collective action externally may present a degree of unity but internally, is always heterogeneous. According to Alvarez and Escobar these expressions range "from squatters to ecologists, from popular kitchens in poor urban neighborhoods to Socialist feminist groups, from human rights and defense of life mobilizations to gay and lesbian coalitions, [consequently] the spectrum of Latin American collective action covers a broad range" (1992: 2). During the early 1980s, the main form of collective action was mobilization through confrontation and protest, which "challenged the state's economic and political models and called into question authoritarian and hierarchical ways of doing politics" (Escobar and Alvares, 1992: 2). Later, confrontational strategies proved inadequate during transition to democracy and "in the new situation, a multiplicity of social actors establish their presence and spheres of autonomy in a fragmented social and political space" (Escobar and Alvares, 1992: 3).

This fragmented social space encompasses a vast universe of social movements and actors, including women. We cannot treat women as if they all belong to one single category. Poor women, middle class and upper class women cope with different realities, and thus the modes and purpose of their struggles are manifold. This issue is crucial since the strategy/ies

poor women choose to cope are connected to the construction of their collective and individual gender identities. As previous research has shown,

Women in the Peruvian peasant unions demonstrate a distinct femininity or female identity compared with that represented in Hispanic, Catholic urban culture, which in itself is differentiated between popular elements and the elite and middle class. Such different femininities arise through the different class, ethnic and regional cultures in which women live and act, and in turn are negotiated and changed in relation to the state's action (Radcliffe 1993: 197).

Thus when considering women's identity within the context of the diversity of women's struggles, we have to consider all the different aspects that intertwine in the formation of their gender identity. Moreover, we need to talk about a multiplicity of gender identities, as femininity is composed by several segments of femininities, which are tied to gender roles in any specific society. There are certain expectations that society defines for women as mothers, wives, citizens, and the like, and in everyday interactions women have the opportunity to go along with or recreate those expectations. Society and its culture, including the "state, sanctions and promotes certain femininities while marginalizing or suppressing others" (Radcliffe 1993: 197). The main argument about distinguishing between the diversity of gender identities is that some gender identities are feminist, like those that acquire a feminist consciousness (Prindeville 2003) or as some scholars have suggested, uphold egalitarian attitudes (Peltola et al. 2004), while others may not be feminist at all. Feminist consciousness is defined in this piece, as the elaboration of identities that recreate gender roles differently from the traditional way that circumscribe women to their role as mother, housekeeper and wives and within the culture of machismo, as it pertains to Latin America and specifically Peru. In addition, gender consciousness includes the idea that these women show greater sensitivity to women's sociopolitical situation and well being, as demonstrated by Rinehart's (cited by Prindeville 2003) model of gender consciousness. In this article, I use the concept of feminist gender identities as summarizing the positions and points of view that women assume by challenging traditional views, implying a recreation of gender roles, and assuming feminist gender consciousness. The main difference between gender consciousness and identity is that feminist identity includes gender consciousness, assuming a feminist identity and acting accordingly. On the other hand, those women who have developed gender consciousness do not necessarily act against gender inequality.

As we consider poor women, it is important to avoid seeing them as victims and/or helpless, on the contrary, poor women have agency. When we "look from a cultural perspective, Latin American women can emerge as thinkers, cosmologists, creators of worlds" (Behar, 1990: 225) "in which household survival strategies are part of this creativity" (Escobar, 1995: 177), and at the same time, they incorporate changes in the subjective dimensions of women's lives. In this perspective, women's material poverty does not mean poverty of attitudes to bring about change.

Most scholars who study women have used the dichotomy of domestic versus public as the framework of analysis to contrast female and male experience. As Michelle Rosaldo notes:

Domestic, as used here, refers to those minimal institutions and modes of activity that are organized immediately around one or more mothers and their children; public

refers to activities, institutions and forms of association that link, rank, organize, or subsume particular mother-child groups. Though this opposition will be more or less salient in different social and ideological systems, it does provide a universal framework for conceptualizing the activities of the sexes. (Rosaldo 1974: 23)

Nonetheless, I disagree with the claim that “though this opposition will be more or less salient in different social and ideological systems, it does provide a universal framework for conceptualizing the activities of the sexes,” as universal implies the idea not only of predominant but also long-lasting. Societies and culture have by now shown differences, and women’s activism and participation illustrate that old ideas thought as universal before have evolved. Accordingly, scholars have identified women with the domestic sphere and men with the public sphere. The implication for women is that they are restricted to their role as mothers, thus their activities are constrained to child-care and the home. For men, the implications are, in contrast, that they do not have a close commitment to the domestic sphere so they are free to associate to other institutions. This differentiation starts through socialization at an early age, consequently girls and boys are socialized differently as girls become “little mothers” boys learn to be “real men.”

The study of gender in Latin America needs to reflect the reality of women’s and men’s interaction in society as machismo emerges as an ideology embedded in society that gains specific meaning within the domestic and public sphere. In this context, machismo explains why society enables men to hold power and authority in the public sphere and to make all the decisions in and outside the home, while at the same time, Latin American women are expected to submissively accept the premises of machismo, that is, that they have to welcome whatever the men decide (Lamphere 1974: 106). Even if machismo, as traditionally conceived, explains why men hold more power than women, it does not explain why women revolt. This work includes the issue of machismo, because active women when interviewed, mentioned machismo as part of the culture and as a cultural practice, thus widely accepted by men and women. However, active women are aware of the limitations of machismo, and as agents of change, they are willing to amend it as much as they can, even if they unknowingly reproduce it in, for example, raising their male children. However, many actions of Latin American women have challenged machismo even if they have to live with it, the actions of these women have transcended the domestic sphere to the public one.

When analyzing women’s interests, most scholars adopt Molyneux’s (1985) approach that distinguishes practical from strategic gender interests:

Strategic gender interests are at the base of women’s subjection: the sexual division of labor, sexual violence, control of reproduction, and the domestic, to name only a few, constitute the boundary of women’s affairs. Practical gender interests, although defined by the concrete experiences women share, are strongly affected by class. Dealing with those interests will not directly modify the basic causes of women’s subordination (Barrig 1994: 163).

This approach has been used and interpreted in different ways, thus some scholars have criticized it and others have adopted it as analytical tool. Those who criticize the practical/strategic gender interests approach argue that it becomes problematic to use in the case of women from the popular classes, as it is insufficient to explain their complex reality.

For these poor women, subordination is intertwined not only with gender but also with class, race and issues of political economy (exploitation, economic crisis, etc.). Rejecting this dichotomy, Amy Lind (1992) notes that the approach is limiting for women because it presupposes that women's basic needs are separate from their strategic needs, thus assuming that strategic and practical needs cannot occur simultaneously. On the other hand, other scholars praise the approach. Bennett (1998), in her study of women's struggles, argues that women may organize from practical or strategic gender interests depending whether or not they link their problems to patriarchy and social class. Interestingly, Bennett allows for bridging these two types of gender interests by saying that "sometimes, women participate in protests or popular movements for practical gender interests, but their participation leads to an awareness of their strategic gender interests" (117). Caldeira (1990) also aligns to this position, believing that being in contact with other active women may further develop women's gender consciousness.

As participation is assumed as having an important effect on women's gender identities, it needs to be defined. Participation, in this work, encompasses all activities that women do in or outside their home and that are practiced with other women to achieve common goals that transcend their homes or their particular interests. Participation includes being involved in communal kitchens or a community-based program (such as "glass of milk" or child-care centers), a neighborhood organization, etc. Active participation means that women are really involved, thus they dedicate some time to that participation, and in consequence, women who only attend meetings once in a while will not be considered active participants. Thus participation requires *active involvement* and, as in the case of machismo, it is a key concept to challenge the theoretical framework that assigns the domestic sphere to women and the public one to men.

Historical background: Women, feminists and political developments

In *Gender in Third World Perspective*, Georgina Waylen affirms, "since the 1970s the world has witnessed the so-called third wave of democratization. [...] Democratization is therefore being seen by many political scientists as one of the most significant trends of the late twentieth century" (1996: 115). In the case of Latin America, democratization and transition to democracy has not been uniform. For some countries the 1970s and 1980s meant a good-bye to democratic institutions, while others saw the return of democracy. Still others never faced dictatorships but did suffer from guerrillas or civil wars. Regardless of the type of the regime, most countries generated social movements, many gender-based. For those that endured authoritarian regimes, oppressions like persecutions, repression and disappearing became common as political activities and militancy were forbidden (Jelin 1990 Radcliffe & Westwood 1993). However, this censorship to traditional forms of mobilizations resulted in alternative ways and strategies of mobilization, especially for women. They began to organize by themselves to either protest or to solve the practical problems of survival. There were many types of demands, from mothers asking for their children, wives looking for their husbands, to housewives demanding food, water and services. In this context, the ideology of domesticity embedded in a patriarchal culture saved women from estate repression, acting as a protecting shield to women's mobilization. Many times repression was not exercised as women's claims were related to their roles in the domestic sphere: mothers, wives, and housekeepers. That was the case of Mothers of Plaza de Mayo in Argentina who organized to question the Junta about their children. On the other

hand, women who did not have claims associated to traditional roles, such as those women who were active in political parties and unions, also in Argentina, were persecuted and many disappeared.

One feature of the Peruvian regime was that the “military dictatorship in Peru did not conform to the model of bureaucratic authoritarian regime” (Barrig 1994: 152), as the dictatorship was part of a socialist regime. However, the methods of social control based on repression, persecution and restriction of civil and political freedoms were similar to those used in other countries such as Chile, Argentina, Uruguay and Brazil that conformed to the traditional bureaucratic authoritarian regime. The consequences also were similar to other countries regarding the emergence of new social actors: women, young people and a revitalized Catholic Church. In addition, the Velasco regime established in Peru in 1968 was a reaction to the ruling class and not against popular classes. The regime was willing to install a set of social and economic reforms based on leftist ideology through strengthening the Communist Party and developing close relations with unions, shantytowns and the universities. Later, all of these allies would turn against the military government and call for the end of the dictatorship when decisions about economic austerity were made in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The call of these sectors was not to recover democratic political institutions, as they were not interpreted as beneficial for the masses, but instead they demanded better salaries and the satisfaction of basic needs (Barrig, 1994).

In 1980, Belaunde gained power and with him came the re-installment of the demoliberal model. The economic crisis was so severe that food and other goods started arriving from different international development agencies. At the same time that women and neighborhood associations started organizing, the government began the distribution of “foodstuff and provisions” enforcing an “*asistencialista*” welfare state model, which had implications in developing women’s strategy and actions (Blondet 1990). Later, new types of organizations gained visibility throughout the country: communal kitchen or *comedores populares*, the glass of milk or *vaso de leche*, mothers’ clubs or *clubes de madres*, medical stands or *postas médicas*, and child-care centers or *guarderías infantiles* for working mothers.

In 1985, Alan Garcia from APRA became president, implementing a populist government and giving a continuation to the previous welfare state model. Thus similar organizational strategies, only exacerbated by the populist characteristics, were adopted. According to Maruja Barrig, “the APRA government (1985-1990) saw women’s organizations –such as the 2000 mothers’ club created under a program headed by Alan Garcia’s wife- as a promising arena for co-optation, and clientelistic politics” (1994 171). In 1990, Fujimori was elected to office and in 1992, he accomplished a self-coup d’état or *autogolpe*. The consequence was the closing down of the Peruvian Congress and the launching of a package of economic reforms based on neo-liberal policies, which strongly affected the working class and the poor. Women’s organizations of the 1990s are a product of those political and economic developments (Barrig 1994).

Another political development that had an impact on the leadership in the poor areas since the 1980s was the emergence of a terrorist group known as *Sendero Luminoso* (Shining Path). While in the beginning it was a group acting only in rural areas, it progressively started to spread to the Lima metropolitan area. In its first steps, *Sendero Luminoso*, one of the many Peruvian guerrilla groups, was well received by the leadership of neighborhood movements. However, people soon realized that *Sendero* aimed at destroying any opposition

or independent grassroots leadership (Barrig 1994; personal interview with Donatilda Gamarra 1997) in which many women were involved. One event that reflects the severity of the attack to women's leadership in the popular movement was the 1992 bombing and killing of Maria Elena Moyano, the leader of the *Federación Popular de Mujeres* (Federation of Popular Women). In consequence, threats and discouragement became a violent obstacle to women's participation.

The case of *las mujeres del sector popular* in Lima

This section contains parts of the ethnographic material collected during fieldwork conducted in Lima during the summer of 1997 that had as main objective to explore women's gender identity formation in relation to their participation in grassroots organizations or *organizaciones populares/vecinales de mujeres*. The emphasis was put in the specific process that took place during the 1990s. Data was gathered through personal in-depth interviews with women who were involved in neighborhood organizations, focusing only on organizations formed by women (women-only grassroots or neighborhood organizations). Interviews were divided into six sections to retrieve information about different aspects of women's lives that included: 1-biographical and family data; 2- women's reasons to get involved and their commitment to the organizations; 3- organizational objectives; 4- self-interpretation of women's interests, including family planning and violence against women; 5- feminism and participation; and 6- organizational funding.

The total number of interviews with women from the popular sector was 26, and in addition, other 4 complementary interviews were conducted (2 males and 2 females) with people involved with the neighborhood associations through governmental and non-governmental programs. The geographical area covered was very vast and diverse, ranging from old established poor neighborhoods to newly developed *pueblos jóvenes* (shantytowns): Villa Maria del Truinfo, San Juan del Urigancho, Villa El Salvador, Sarita Colonia, Ventanilla, Mi Peru, San Martin de Porres, Manzanilla, San Juan de Miraflores, Los Olivos, Manchay and Salamanca. All communities were located in different parts of Metropolitan Lima, mainly in the outskirts of the city. All women were involved in one or more of the following programs: *comedores populares* (communal kitchen), *vaso de leche* (glass of milk), *club de madres* (mothers' club), *wawa-wasi* (mother's administered and government controlled child-care center), and neighborhood based organizations. The interviewees included women who were involved in these organizations or were holding local offices at the grassroots level through the organizations. Purposely, women who had undergone feminist training (very fashionable in those days in Peru) were excluded to ensure that their gender identity was not the result of specific feminist training or feminist consciousness rising in workshops. This exclusion was based on the idea that I was exploring the process of feminist gender identity formation as the product of women's self-participation and mobilization. (Peru has many women-oriented NGOs financed by international feminist agencies.)

Table 1 summarized the statistics and demographic characteristics of the interviewees, detailing age, origin, number of children, and education. Issues and topics found most relevant for this work are motives for participation, personal feelings about participation and its aftermath (personal change), types of participation, domestic violence, family planning and women's interests.

Table 1- Women's Demographic data

Age (mean)	42.5
Youngest	21
Oldest	72
Origin (place of birth)	
Lima	42 %
Provinces	58 %
# of children (mean)	3.6
Education	
Illiterate	3 %
Primary	31 %
Secondary	27 %
University	8 %
Technical-Superior	31 %

Own elaboration

When women were asked about the reasons that they began participating in their community, the interviewees mentioned many: economic necessity, to get something in exchange, lack of services, need of social change, due to an invitation, to boost their self-esteem, to do networking, to learn more, to assume responsibilities, among others. While we can appreciate that women feel compelled to participate for many different reasons, it becomes obvious that the impossibility to meet their family's needs through their own limited means was what led some women to participate, including some of them who would have not participated otherwise. When these women were asked about their personal feelings and reactions about participation in these grassroots organization the majority (96%) mentioned they experienced a personal change for the better. This psychological effect on women encompassed a sentiment of feeling stronger, more self-confident, and secure. Many mentioned having lost '*la vergüenza*' or shame, not in moral terms but in a relational sense. For example, most of the women active in organizations (88%) noted that they perceived themselves different from the typical 'housewives' who did not participate in any activity. In their opinion about the non- involved housewives (the others), active women considered non-active ones as less open, shy and non-talkative, or those who expect the husbands to provide. Thus active women see themselves as different because they have challenged traditional gender roles, they are not expecting their husbands or partners to provide, they are capable of organizing to change their surroundings and find an answer to their needs.

The idea that women participate in more than one organization was confirmed, as 81% of the interviewees responded affirmatively when asked about multiple participation. It was very common to find women who participated in *comedores populares* and *vaso de leche*, but also in Church based organizations and *club the madres*, among others. Questions about domestic violence were included because I believe that awareness and a position in relation to such issue are conducive to the formation of gender identities. By asking about this, I put women in a situation where they needed to formulate an opinion. All of the women (100%) acknowledged domestic violence as prevalent in their communities and society and recognized it as a problem that affects many families and women. Interestingly, many suggested that violence is not restricted to physical forms and mentioned that emotional and psychological violence exercised by men in particular and society in general

are also problems. Most of the women (96 %) were in favor of family planning, and the only respondent who disagreed did so because in certain neighborhoods family planning was forced through sterilization, being imposed or manipulated by the government. This optimistic perception of family planning does not necessarily reflect their own practice, who in most cases regretted either the lack of information at the time they began their families or the impossibility to cope with the resistance of their partners against using contraception. This position indicates that many women of the popular sector believe that having control over their reproductive rights is key to their empowerment and to exercising of power within the home. Women's standpoint against domestic violence and in favor of family planning, from my point of view, contributes to the formation of their feminist gender identities.

Responses pertaining women's interests showed a shift in which women are moving toward more complex goals. As described previously, women in the 1980s focused their activities on the satisfaction of basic needs during crisis (Jelin 1986; Jaquette 1994; Blondet 1991; Barrig 1994). In 1997, although people still believe they are living in an economic crisis, women feel that meeting basic needs is becoming less important in relation to other objectives. When asked what their main interests were, they mentioned job training (57%) and job creation (53%). Other choices ranged from health, legal assistance, child-care, water, electricity and phones, food, paved streets, police service, and a change in men.

Already presented, Table 1 summarizes demographic information about the interviewees. In terms of age, most of the women who participated in grassroots organizations were in their late thirties and early forties. The number of interviews is too limited to neither allow generalizations nor contrast generational similarities and differences among the women. However, the issue of internal migration in Peru is an interesting element that contributes to a better the description of the sample.

Research on migrations patterns in Peru indicates that starting in the 1950s a large number of people from the rural areas started to arrive and settle around Lima, giving origin to today's *barríos populares* (poor neighborhoods) and *pueblos jóvenes* (shantytowns). In my sample of women, I found that the majority (58%) of the women interviewed came from the rural areas or *provincias* (*selva, costa and sierra*) while the others (42%) were originally from Metropolitan Lima, thus confirming previous research. Urbanization trends in Latin America indicated that there was a massive displacement of people leaving the rural areas toward the cities, in search of better living conditions (Green 1997). Urbanization in this case meant in the case of Peru not only changed in the life style but a change in the migrants' perceived ethnicity, as in Lima, migrants coming from the provinces become *cholos*, adopting a the city lifestyle and dressing codes, and making them subject of what de la Cadena calls "silent racism" (2001).

According to some scholars (Blondet 1991; Barrig 1994), education has many reverberations for women. Peruvian scholars and academics with whom I discussed my research, mentioned that the trend in the 1990s indicated that poor women are becoming more educated (Carmen Montero, Cecilia Blondet, Patricia Olearte), and the responses from the sample of interviewees supports this fact, as 66% completed high school or further education, and only 3% were illiterate. Many women said it was their own choice to pursue an education as a means of economic liberation and personal enhancement; furthermore, some women said to have acquired more education as adults, which illustrates their determination. The number of children women bear is important as it shows that fertility is going down. The average of 3.6 children per woman in the sample shows a drastic change

with the national average of 6.9 children per woman in 1950 (FLACSO, 1993), however, it is higher than the national average that arises from the Peruvian 1990 Census, of 2.6. Anyhow, our data illustrates how women from the masses, or poor women, still tend to have more children.

Analyzing women's voices

This section considers women's voices as they portrayed themselves. My aim is to analyze the formation of gender identities, especially feminist identities, along the process of participation and involvement in grassroots organizations. As mentioned before, there was a diversity of motives that led women to participate in grassroots organizations. Some of them mentioned a concrete episode that made them get involved or "forced" them to participate. Others said to have experienced a "call" of different types such as religious, political or personal. Estela made reference to "beginning to participate in catechism in the neighborhood chapel and since then, I became interested in social work." Similarly, Sara stated "I started to become more sensitive to social issues from my Christian experience." These two experiences should be understood in relation to the high involvement of the Catholic Church (and later other Christian churches) in social change in some countries in Latin America through liberation theology (Berryman 1987 and Levine 1992). Thus many people became active in grassroots organizations through a previous religious engagement that made them aware of injustices, empowering them to seek change.

Josefina remembered becoming involved in a "*comedor* (communal kitchen) when I got separated from my husband... also I worked as a street vendor." Maximiliana mentioned that she and her family were in need, "we did not have enough and I had to help in some way." Juana recalled becoming first interested as she was exercising her political rights, that is when "went to vote with my *libreta electoral* (identification card for electoral purposes)... I wanted to become a lawyer. As a poor person you want to defend the poor." Donatilda, a councilwoman at the time of the interview, said "I was afraid to be alone in the dark, when I first came to Villa (El Salvador) I escorted my husband everywhere because I did not want to stay in the darkness (referring to the lack of electricity). Then I became interested in the neighborhood and within three months I was a *dirigenta* (leader)." Elizabeth who is single and has no children was touched when she "saw the need of the community, the children were in the streets, dirty. I started the *wawa-wasi* (child-care center) out of my own initiative." Rosa provided a different account, "I was a union leader. By the end of the 1970s, I was fired and my name was included in the black list. Then I became involved with neighborhood organizing."

Other women mentioned a very different rationale, which could be called "by invitation." Irma said that she started by word of mouth, "some *señoras* told me about a mothers' club, I signed up and started to participate as a *socia* (member)." Maria Luisa was invited by the "Principal of the school in the community. I was interested in working with children." Jessica remembered that it was "by my friend's initiative who told me about the program (primary education). After that, I enjoyed the work with children and decided to study education." In these cases, Maria Luisa was invited by friends and neighbors while Carola was asked by her sister-in-law.

From the motivations and experiences mentioned by these women, we can recognize that in practice there is a wide variety of motives that sparked women's participation. While some women became involved because of altruistic missions, others did so due to the fact

that friends or relatives solicited their participation. Also, a few were pursuing religious or political causes, and others mentioned some kind of episode or event that made them decide to engage in activism. Thus there is no single path that acts as a trigger for participation; however, it seems that once they began to participate, there was no way back.

Not only are the motives that encourage women's activism important to comprehend, but also how they felt as a consequence of their active participation in the community. Involvement generally results in an increase of women's self-esteem and in the development of a sense of empowerment. There are other consequences of participation as well. Happiness, feelings of accomplishment, and satisfaction were mentioned by most of the women, moreover, a "set" of three self-feelings appeared to be very significant for them as they revealed accomplishing *autovaloración* (self-esteem), self-fulfillment and self-confidence. The repetitive use of the prefix self indicates how relevant it is for women to participate in grassroots organizations in terms of their feminist gender identity as a psychological process.

Maximiliana said, "I feel very well, I am doing good. Both people and myself have confidence in me. People give me value." Luisa found that she has learned something new, "I deal with people who are *mas que uno* (more than you). One educates oneself better even in the language... Now I feel strong and happy. I am not doing anything wrong but cooperating." Estela recognized a change in her relationship with her husband as part of the learning experience: "I had to become *más fuerte* (stronger) with my husband... Sometimes we do not share the meals and I need to make him understand. He says that women have to be at home and I tell him that men can do it, too." Juana believes that she matured more by participating, "I learned to be more conscious and responsible. As a woman I feel the abuse of the *dirigentes* (male leaders) toward women and also that of *las mujeres machistas* (women who uphold machism)." Donatilda also felt strongly about being a woman: "I learned a lot, I am not a feminist, *soy mujer* (I am a woman). I learned from them [feminists] many things, to fight for equality. For example before I would have never denounced a husband, I would now. I feel good about myself, to express what I feel. I know myself better as a woman now... Change strengthens you."

Elizabeth found through participation a path to *autovalorarse* (self-esteem). Agustina, the oldest of the interviewees, provided an insightful personal experience as a consequence of participation that also sheds some light in relation to older and younger generations, but that shows how even older women experience change due to participation: "One feels more content. When you get married you become a slave, one lives in the kitchen door. Always fighting with the husband. Now, for me, it is over, I am done with child rearing." Haydee sensed that through participation she has changed many values, and the relationship with her "*pareja*" (partner) has reaffirmed itself. Marta has enjoyed "learning and [she] like[s] to get training." Maria Luisa said "I feel a sense of self-fulfillment." On the overall, these experiences illustrate the deep effect that participation brings to women's lives as they got involved.

Previous research examined the diversity of roles women play and the multiplicity of activities for which they are responsible. In the interviews, I asked about these issues. Of the 26 interviewees, 20 women responded that they participate in more than one organization. This confirms the hypothesis of women's multiple and overlapping participation in different grassroots organizations. For example, most of the women who are involved with the *comedores populares* (communal kitchens) are also involved (as members, recipients or

leaders) with the *Vaso de leche* (glass of milk program). Others experience multiple membership in mothers' clubs, and in *comedores* or *vaso de leche*, or *talleres productivos* (income generating workshops) and *talleres de alfabetización* (literacy program) associated with the clubs. In addition some women, beside their unpaid participation in community organizations, also hold a paid job that may or may not be connected to their participation in popular organizations. It was common for some women to work as community organizers with programs carried out by non-governmental and governmental organizations as well. This suggests that participation may take a spiral form, once women become involved with one organization, by association they start participating in other organizations of similar nature. This forms a participation spiral. In other words, participation brings more participation in the sense that networking increases the possibilities of having access to other jobs, paid or unpaid ones, which is an important objective for some women of the popular sector that they need to provide for their families.

The fact that most women become involved with more than one organization also illustrates that they are transcending the traditional boundaries of domesticity or what has been traditionally called the domestic sphere. Here, I argue that even if the nature of their activity remains related to carrying out some domestic chores, these domestic chores reach the public domain as these women, through the domestic chores, are establishing relations and interaction that go beyond their own households, reaching others. The ramifications of their activities have an impact not only on the community as a whole, but also on the government and the local micro-economic system as women in their involvement deal with governmental agencies to solve problems of basic infrastructure and generate resources to satisfy their needs. Moreover, women's activism benefit both the home and the community, consequently their activities transcend to the public sphere. Activities of women of the popular sector and their contributions become "activities, institutions and forms of association that link, rank, organize, or subsume particular mother-child groups" (Rosaldo and Lamphere, 1974). For women in the Lima's shantytowns, those links are represented by programs such as *comedores populares*, *vaso de leche*, *wawa-wasi*, *talleres productivos* and *de alfabetización*. The complexity of the multiple involvement of women in grassroots organizations brings women's visibility into the public sphere, even if their activism is mainly confine to the local level. Through their engagement, women learn to feel they can be powerful and that they do hold some power, and these feelings feed their feminist gender identity.

Family planning and the decisions about the number of children is a relevant topic for all women, especially those of the popular sector. Responses to this question expressed the desire of women to control their own lives and bodies. To avoid controversy, I asked women how decisions **should** be made hoping that women would feel free to express themselves if personal beliefs or experiences were not specifically touched. The majority of the women, 96%, favored family planning, which is overwhelming high for a Roman Catholic country. Jessica the youngest interviewee made reference to a traditional joke as she answered the question: "People have to watch a lot of TV". Then she quickly added, "this issue is to be taken very seriously, [family planning] is a free service and some people keep having babies." Estela provided a different approach, she thinks, "it has to be optional. But there are families that do not know how to do family planning, in others the man does not want his wife to use protection because of his *machismo*." Luisa also mentioned that it is great to have family planning but sometimes "men disallow women to control their fertility

because of their *machismo*.” Josefina mentioned she feels very confident about younger generations implementing more conscious family planning methods. Haydee’s revelation seems pertinent for our discussion of feminist gender identity; she stated that family planning is in my opinion “very important. It helps women to make decisions and to organize themselves. It avoids the overwhelming situation of having many children. Being able to control the number of children is important for the children too, so parents are able to take care of them properly.” Rosa P. emphasized the same preoccupation about the possibility of “taking good care of the ones that families already have: feed them, clothe them and give them education.” Yolanda said that family planning is good because Peru is a poor country. These responses illustrate the centrality of family planning as a daily issue. It shows that the decision is not to be made only by men, as the following discussion relates.

When women were asked about how the decision of having children should be reached, most of them responded that a decision of that importance should be a shared one, it should be discussed between the female and the male. Although an agreement between the two partners is important, in case of disagreement, women believed that the female should have a stronger input or she should reach the final decision, since she will be the one primordially dealing with the children. Women mentioned the necessity to talk with their husbands or partners, “*es una decisión de pareja*” (it is a decision of the couple) that should also consider the economic crisis and difficulty of these times. Elizabeth said “with the husband, together” and Maximiliana suggested “between the two.” Juana went further to affirm that overall, “the decision is a decision of the woman,” and along the same line, Elena thought that it is a responsibility of the female, “women have to make the decision, that is why women ought to be strong.” Polonia believed that the decision should be “more of the woman.” Cristina agreed on the fact that “the last word has to come out of the female because she deals with the work load.” In many instances, their responses reflected the difficulties that arise when the decision is actually made, thus on the contrary to what they believe, wish or want, the developing of the events makes the decision for them. That is why some women said that although women should make the decision, it is very difficult for women to deal with the real problem when men come back home drunk, since they cannot control their spouses’ sexual behavior (Rosa M.). In addition, another issue that goes along with being able to control male sexual behavior is the fact that because of *machismo*, resistance by the female could implicate betrayal, thus women’s limitations are not just of physical resistance. Their integrity and morality is under surveillance and thus resisting to sexual relations may be mistakenly interpreted by the male.

Women’s voices indicate that women feel they have agency or should have agency (as having a say) in decisions pertaining to the number of children. Despite the fact that their capacity to influence decisions could or could not have been put into practice in concrete situations, I argue that this sense of agency is part of their feminist gender identity. Change has occurred internally, as nobody agreed with the old belief that women ought to have as many children as God sends them, or their husbands desire. These women have learned from experience, especially those who did not have control over their fertility, of the necessity for change. Women learned that they need to have control of their lives and own bodies, thus this awareness is part of their feminist gender identities because it challenges society expectations that limit women’s rights to decide about their fertility.

Concerning domestic violence, all women recognized the problem, but not necessarily personally. Only one interviewee acknowledged suffering violence in the past,

although her personal experience was not domestic. Juana, who recognized herself as a victim of psychological and moral abuse for being a woman, said "I was very strong and now I teach women to participate." Women recognized domestic violence as a problem affecting women and children together. Interestingly, women identified multiple sources of violence, not just physical beating. Elizabeth thought that "the economic situation and alcoholism" contribute to physical aggression. Donatilda mentioned that the issue of economic violence also contributes. Irene said: "sometimes, the husband comes home *con la cabeza caliente* (with a hot head), or when there is lack of work, or when the children ask for food... the problems go to infinity. When they come home drunk, they beat their children and wives." Estela agreed that violence "is not only *golpe* (hitting), but words, insults and *maltrato* (abuse, mistreatment). We are always victims of mistreatment even when we simply take the bus."

Rosa L. returned to the issue of machismo, "men are *machistas*" she claimed and "even for little problems they beat their wives and children. Addiction to drugs and alcohol are the problems." Rosa P. saw violence as "more hidden because women are learning to defend themselves. The causes are *machismo*, ignorance, economic need and unemployment, men feel impotent to respond to their families' needs." Rosa M. said "some are *machistas* and others are *borrachos* (drunk)." Teresa, Cristina, Silvia, Irma and Polonia mentioned *machismo* as a source of generalized violence against women and Haydee added that machismo brings "*maltrato* (mistreatment) which is not only physical but psychological, men feel they must remain in control. This idea is reinforced since childhood." Juana suggested (espousal) rape as a new angle within domestic violence, which comes when "the wife does not want to have more children." Josefina added "there is violence in every moment. Violence enforced by their husbands, there is sexual harassment in the home. Men are *machistas*, they believe that women are their belongings, that they can do what they want whenever, including taking them to bed whenever they wish." Domestic violence as recognized by these women generates resistance and rebellion against men. Women feel more confident, they feel they can act upon violent acts, and that they are capable of denouncing the offenders to defend themselves and their children. This awareness fosters women's resistance to unequal relations with men, therefore I suggest that this new attitude is also part of their feminist gender identities by which they confront men or define a position in opposition to their male counterparts and their behaviors.

One rationalization of domestic violence, as explained to me on several occasions and which elucidates why some women do not act upon violence, is the traditional belief about "*amor serrano*" (highland love). This interpretation is brought to discussion as many of the women living in the shantytowns are originally from the highland provinces where this type of love supposedly is practiced. The basic definition of highland love is "*mas me pegas mas te quiero*" (the more you beat me, the more I love you), which implies that women are expecting their husbands to beat them as a way to demonstrate their true affection. On the other hand, if the husbands do not beat them, women would tend to think that they do not love them any longer. This tradition is criticized in Lima because it is perceived as primitive and originated, according to popular culture, in the ignorance of the indigenous people. Highland love when brought to the city, even if we know that domestic violence is not an original product of the Andes, becomes ethnitized or racialized. As I interviewed Jessica, she recognized the practice of highland love as a source of male violence against women explaining that as rooted in their own traditions, indigenous women do not resist the

aggression of indigenous men as indigenous men did not resist the violence of the (Spanish) colonizer. In consequence, Jessica added, “women do not report their partners.”

Issues of family planning and violence against women are both relevant to the study of the process of women’s gender identity formation through participation in organizations. As women participate in grassroots organizations and interact with other women, they began to acknowledge that they share similar concerns, preoccupations and everyday problems not only with respect to their families and husbands but also in relation to their own self-fulfillment. By opposing male partners, and acknowledging that women have rights and strengths, they experience feelings of empowerment and agency that foster self-esteem. Active women want to have a sense of self-fulfillment as human beings, which is reached through their accomplishments through participation in grassroots organizations. In this sense, they do not want to limit their roles and expectations in society only as mothers and wives. On the one hand, these women from the shantytowns want to be happy and the traditional model of “staying in the kitchen door” or watching the children does not allow room for that. On the other hand, they do not reject being mothers or wives, as many times those roles have sparked their mobilization. Their “*realización*” (self-fulfillment) requires not only psychological elements but material ones as well. They have found out that through participation in local organizations and employment obtained through networking in grassroots organizations, women are able to provide for themselves and for their families, thus motherhood and traditional roles gained a new twist and may become liberating, or maternal activism, as I have called it elsewhere (Padilla 2001).

The need for material goods became relevant when questioning women about “women’s interest.” Women were asked to express their opinion by self-assessing the services/interests that they believe important for women and their neighborhood. The responses, as noted previously, varied ranging from basic needs to job training and legal advice. This variation could indicate not only that women may have a diversity of needs but also that they are at different stages or points in the construction of their feminist gender identities. It is important to explain that such generalizations do not imply that there is one path or process in the formation of women’s gender identities, such an assumption would be erroneous. Analyzing women’s responses, I encountered three main types of preoccupations. One dealt with satisfaction of basic and immediate needs for them and their families; the second type focused on jobs, training/education based on economic and material concerns; and the third one emphasized a diversity of complementary concerns such as parenting classes, legal assistance for women, among others. The three types of concerns imply consequences for women, although the implications of the last two types of concerns (economic/material and complementary) have a broader meaning. Therefore they could be seen as indicators of women who are at a more developed stage or point of the process of their feminist gender identities. However, we need to be careful about identifying stages, as already mentioned, as the differences could have an alternate explanation not provided here.

According to Marta, Luisa, Maximiliana and Silvia, women’s interest were “water and sewage,” also some added “cleanness, roads, schools, police and a market.” These statements demonstrate more than anything, that *pueblos jóvenes*’ (shantytowns) lack of basic infrastructure, which is important from the standpoint of the quality of life. Thus, in relation to women’s interests, we cannot assume that these concerns are only for the satisfaction of their basic and practical needs. As we consider their opinion on other subjects, women expressed concerns with changes in their cultural, social and physical environment. Other

women presented a different assessment, they privileged either job creation or training and education geared to finding a job that fits the current demand of the market, as well as women's needs. Sara said, "all women ask for jobs, they want jobs and job training." Teresa believed that employment is important as well as the creation of women's micro-enterprises. Haydee, besides her concern with health, was preoccupied with "education and the preparation to work in the real world, so people can look for alternatives options when searching for a job." Sonia requested "more jobs, there are only a few. More jobs mean more income, most of us have many children." Irene desired "more jobs, because sometimes there are learning centers that prepare us but there are no jobs."

Education, mostly associated with training, is seen as a prerequisite to job creation. It is interesting to note that when women are asking for work, they ask for jobs for themselves and not for their husbands. The corollary is that they are seeking opportunities to transcend the traditional idea of staying in the domestic space or home. Thus, the fact that these women live in *pueblos jóvenes* (shantytowns) should illuminate our understanding and interpretation about what they defined and characterized as interests and concerns. Instead of assuming that they are basic because they ask for water or electricity, we should see how their lack of water made them aware of a reality of scarcity and inequalities, which turned many of them into activists.

Finally, some women were concerned with issues and interests that can be considered complementary but also complex. In addition to perceiving education, training and economic opportunities for women as important, these women mentioned legal advising, *charlas de orientación*, and preparation as *ciudadanas* (citizens) as relevant women's issues. Elizabeth wanted to know how to "defend herself, advance and make a living", she also mentioned that she dislikes *asistencialismo/populismo* (populist welfare state) in which government gives but does not teach how to make a living. Maria Luisa believed that "parenting classes for mothers and fathers and the family in general" are required, insisting, "when there are public campaigns, only women attend, we need men to attend so they change; to change their machismo." This comment indicates that women want to reverse the traditional domestic/public sphere that defines men and women's activities and roles and also that the participation of both women and men are necessary to produce social change.

The voices of women of the popular classes in Lima, as presented here, provide evidence to challenge the dichotomy of strategic and practical interest as a consequence only of class. Molineaux (1985) had suggested that only practical interests are class-oriented while strategic interests cross class barriers. In this sense, the practical and strategic interests approach is not found useful because it does not reflect women's reality and participation patterns in the Lima shantytowns. As illustrated throughout the ethnographic accounts aforementioned, even if many of women's basic needs seem to be related to class (being poor), it is not straightforward to assume that poverty is the only problem, as for some women being poor may be also a consequence of their race or ethnicity (prejudice against indigenous people), or due to the fact that they face more constraints because they are women. For example, domestic violence is an issue that crosses all classes, and women from different classes may fight against it, but sources of domestic violence may be very varied. Some causes are similar across classes, while others are specific to poverty. Machismo, drug addiction and alcoholism are common causes. While not having enough food or water are causes related to poverty when intertwined with machismo and a sexist society, this might instill violence within the family. As shown, the sources of women's oppression and

subjection are multiple, and class intertwines with gender and ethnicity (although not fully considered here). For most of these women, there exists double, triple or multiple sources of oppression.

Even from an analytical perspective, the practical/strategic gender interests dichotomy could be useful in understanding the different interests of women's activism and how those can be understood in light of gender identity. But it is important to be aware of another possible contradiction embedded in the practical versus strategic interests dichotomy, that is the presumption that there is only one path of evolution from practical to strategic interests. As ethnographic evidence showed, women find different paths to solve problems and alleviate their oppression. The strategies women chose embodied elements that Molineaux would consider both practical and strategic, for example women might be struggling for drinking water (practical), job training (practical and/or strategic) or family planning (strategic) at the same time. The reality poor women encounter is very complex and as they participate in grassroots organizations, they find multiple ways through which they develop a feminist gender identity.

Conclusion

In light of the theoretical framework, the historical and political background, and the voices of women in the shantytowns, some general conclusions can be reached. The use of the domestic and public spheres to distinguish between women and men's activities, limits women more than men, and ignores possible overlapping for both women and men. As shown through their personal accounts, many women move from the domestic to the public sphere, and sometimes the spheres overlap as women transcend domesticity moving back and forth. Women's voices showed in detail men's negative attitudes toward their boundary crossing and how that makes them aware not only of gender inequality but of their desire for change toward a more egalitarian situation. This is important in terms of gender identities, as identities are always relational and in the case of gender identities they are defined in relation and in interaction with men, whether partners, neighbors or men in general. Women mentioned that their male counterparts tend to resist entering the domesticity of their homes and assuming domestic responsibilities. This implies that any change for women would require change and transformation for men as well. This is because both men and women share the home, the children, and have a relationship. Gender identity(ies), whether feminist or not, do not exist in a vacuum.

Consequently, I argue that when women gain (a) feminist gender identity(ies), they define this identity(ies) in relation and connection to their male counterparts and other men represented by men in male dominated organizations, such as the government, with whom they deal and to whom they mainly raise demands and requests. Women from the popular classes in Lima become aware of their agency when through activism they relate to and with other women, and they find out they have capacity to bring about some change. In this way, women realize the importance of their contribution not only to their self-fulfillment as persons but also to the growth of their families and society. When women oppose, resist or believe in change, it is in relation to their partners or male-dominated organizations. They may say 'no' to more children, report men in case of violence (either their own or someone they know), participate in local organizations despite their husbands' resistance to women's involvement outside the homes. These are examples that illustrate the identity behind women's participation in grassroots organizations, which I call 'feminist gender identity' or

simply 'feminist identity', because it challenges and transcends domesticity and also brings women's visibility to the public sphere.

As reflected in the interviews, the ideology of machismo is still prevalent in Lima. As some women expressed, men are *machistas* but there are also women who believe in machismo. However, nowadays, women of the popular classes are willing to challenge machismo as they seek change in their own lives and in the lives of their children's. Machismo foundations are becoming less convincing to legitimize men's and society injustice toward women and children. Women identified machismo as a cause for many "*males*" (wrongs in society) such as domestic violence, resistance to family planning, opposition to women's involvement in other activities, male possessiveness of women and discouragement of female self-realization. In consequence, at the same time that machismo is present in their daily lives, it is also resisted. This resistance acts as a spark of women's feminist gender identity because the unfairness of machismo makes women realize the need of equality in their relations with their partners.

The classification of women's interests into strategic and practical could be useful sometimes, but it is important to understand its limitations, at least to understand and explain the interests of women of the popular sector in Lima. The main limitation of the dichotomous category is its ethnocentrism and in consequence, the restriction that brings to the analysis. In the Peruvian case, causes of subjection and oppression of poor women are multiple. The prescription of what type of interest should come first in women's struggle for gender equality is to accept that the path to gender equality is an established one and that it applies to all women regardless of class and location. This has been proven wrong. It is time for scholars to broaden our understanding, and to be open to alternatives. As new social movement theory has highlighted, collective action's strategies are manifold and the ethnographic accounts of poor women render the evidence. Thus it is important to discover and unveil those strategies in order to understand social movements in different world contexts. Participation in grassroots organizations have contributed, on the one hand, to the enhancement of women's self-esteem, and on the other hand, it has made women become aware of potential by gaining gender consciousness, which in the cases of the Lima women contributed to the formation of their feminist gender identities. Thus, in the case studied here, gender consciousness has led women to gain feminist gender identities.

In sum, as women participate they experience personal and social changes that reflect on their gender identities, these identities become more feminist as they gain self-esteem and empowerment and feel sensitive to the situation and well-being of other women. However, it is important to understand too that scholars should not make overarching generalizations. Women's experiences are so rich and complex that simplifying their reality does not contribute to a better understanding of such complexity.

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¹ Assistant Professor at UAL, Univesidade Autónoma de Lisboa, Portugal. Pos-doctoral Fellow at ISCTE-CIES, Lisbon, Portugal.

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