

WOMEN'S LIFE AWARENESS AND THE FOOD
CONNECTION : SOME LATIN AMERICAN CASES

Cristina PADILLA DIESTE

When I began to write this paper, I thought I had got hold of a new idea ; that a contemporary phenomenon had so far escaped the no doubt very perceptive eyes of so many women now working on women's political theory and practice. Now I know that the idea was not new and the phenomenon not exclusive of our own times. But since the idea *and* the phenomenon are in my opinion worthy of consideration in any case and surely destined to play sooner or later a major part in our struggle, I thought I had to come here and speak to you about them.

Let us begin with a little exercise in imagination. I beg you to put yourselves in the place of so many women who cannot be here with us, because they have to work. Put yourselves in *their* places for a moment.

For example, you work in a factory and do exactly the same work as the man beside you ; but you are a woman ; so you get lower wages for your work. This and other instances of social inequality have been extensively studied, and hide, as we all know, a very big potential for revolt. We all know that ; it's being talked about all the time and rightly so.

Or again : you work in your home and get absolutely no wages for that work, and neither does your husband, although it is a necessary part of the whole production process. Even more : forget about the wages ; the fact is that more often than not your work at home doesn't get any recognition or acknowledgment at all. It is hard work, but it isn't believed to be so ; you get frightfully tired of it, you get sometimes completely fed up with it - and all the time it is just taken for

granted ! Here is another time bomb for you ; and it is also very well known.

But now consider for a moment : What would happen if a situation develops that simply *disables* you to do that necessary work ? Prices rise too quickly or there is a food shortage, and all sorts of things. What will happen then ? What are *you* going to do ? What are all those women that find themselves in such a situation going to do ?

Well, I know what they *have* done in some cases. And I expect some of you do, too. Let us go through some stories. And in order to have some sort of structure here, let us make one hypothesis about the different *levels* that are involved. I think eight such levels will do for the moment ; they run from the most ordinary to the most extraordinary events, from things that are so common that nobody remarks them to things that are so momentous that the news agencies - if not History with a capital H - consider them worthy of comment.

FIRST LEVEL

It happens everyday and everywhere. Arguments between women and all sorts of tradesmen (and tradeswomen). They are about prices, about shortage, about payment conditions. "Why is the milk so expensive ? If I buy you more of this, would you make the price more reasonable ? Why have you got only such rotten potatoes ? Why aren't there enough eggs ? May I pay you next week ?". And so on, and so forth. (By the way, this sort of thing takes place outside the food connection, too. And so may the other levels).

SECOND LEVEL

I expect it also *has* happened everywhere, but certainly not everyday. It is the organization by women of so-called co-operatives. Perhaps it all starts as an informal effort in getting lower prices by way of buying large quantities of food - or getting at basic things in case of shortage. But in many cases the informal organization develops, women build an administrative structure, they get lorries in order to distribute the goods, and so on. Well, it is all very sad, but experience has taught me it doesn't work. We are at a great disadvantage with respect to supermarkets - either privately or publicly sponsored. Our prices are not competitive, the work is too hard, and there are no

wages. In my experience, all these co-ops end up in bankruptcy. As far as I see, then, co-ops cannot solve the food problems, but we should not for this reason despise or neglect their educational potential : they are definitely excellent for teaching oneself about organization.

THIRD LEVEL

It happened in Mexico not long ago and in several towns at about the same time. Well, I suppose it *did* happen, although for me it never went beyond gossip (I mean, I never read about it in the papers). But it was *nation-wide* gossip, or so it seemed to me, because everyone told me at the time, and I heard about it in many different places. Well, the story went that well-to-do women in several towns were about to pay for what they had in those supermarket trolleys - you must imagine the trolleys bursting because they were so full of things. An then, in each case, with great cleverness, it seems that women from the working classes succeeded in tricking them out of their trolleys. "Don't worry, ma'am, I'll take care of your things for you, you just go and pay, it is so full of people here - not to be believed, really - but don't worry, I'll help you, ma'am, I'll be waiting for you outside with all these things". Well, you may laugh ; I laughed, too ; but what is the meaning of this ? Just think: it happened several times, in different towns, at about the same time.

FOURTH LEVEL

I suppose some of you will remember what happened in Brazil some time ago. Supermarkets in several towns were actually plundered by masses of angry women, who literally rushed violently into them, smashed windows, and so on. Or take Acapulco, in Mexico, a town famous in the whole world for its beaches and its night-life. In the early morning of the 5th of June 1981, groups of people assaulted lorries that were transporting milk, they took away the milk and distributed it among their district's population. Women were not alone in that action, but they were largely involved, so much so that one of them, a pregnant girl, was killed by the police and two others ended up in jail. And even the local newspapers made it quite clear that those women and men were not political activists, but just hungry people - and I tell you, this was big news in Acapulco, the headline of the day, in fact. Now,

this sort of thing happened again the same year in a little Mexican village. There, as a way of expressing their demands, the women teachers assaulted trucks that carried milk and eggs, and again they distributed them among the people. Well, maybe you won't understand this way of expressing one's demands as a member of the academic body ; but it is all in the tradition of the teachers movement in Mexico, at least since the Revolution. Teachers in Mexico have always been solidary with the people and the people's needs. And we ought to be aware of the enormous leadership potential that is hidden in a Mexican teacher - especially a rural one - because of this and other traditions. So it was really and truly a way to express the teachers' demands - you know, as if they were saying : "We cannot distinguish between ourselves and the people, between their needs and our needs. They are the same, when you look at them in the right way". Now, the aftermath of the event was also very interesting. To understand what follows, you must bear in mind that the school there is right outside the village. Well then, the police came to restore law and order, and to put the culprits in prison ; but the women from the village - not everybody, but just the women - came out to meet the police, armed with stick and stones, ready for anything. They defended "their" teachers one by one ; and the police had to withdraw - people spoke even of a cop being seriously hurt. So the police never entered the village, either then or later. The last story I want to tell you at this fourth level has to do with the protection of land by women. It has to do with a tiny Mexican village, called Soyatlan del Oro, where some Indians still live. The Indian's lands were taken away from them many years ago, and since then they have been trying hard to get them back. They have taken two different measures. On the one hand, they have invaded the lands (because the important thing is to be there), and on the other hand, they are trying to negotiate with town authorities (to make it all legal). Now, the negotiations are conducted exclusively by women ; and, although the land invasion is the whole community's business, it is an interesting fact that everytime the police has come to throw the Indians out, it's been women that have stopped them - angry, fearless women with a woman leader. The food connection must be clear ; as the women of Soyatlan put it : "We want the land for our children, so that they may not die of starvation". As simple as that.

FIFTH LEVEL

Here we have the organization of public demonstrations against high prices in towns, but in such a way that the women never come out of their districts. I've seen it in Guadalajara, a very populous city in Mexico, and I can tell you how angry the women were ; I remember one occasion when I pointed out to them that the accompanying children should not be on the street side of the pavement, because I could see some police cars approaching - they just *blazed up* : "What ? police cars ? let a policeman come who dares touch just one child or woman ! let him !". Now, this sort of thing has happened in El Salvador, too, but with an interesting difference. In El Salvador the demonstrators were middle class women, and I read that when the parade came near a market where women from the lower classes sell their products, the latter insulted and even attacked the former. This case reveals how complex a process can be ; you have here at least three factors : sex (they were all women), class conflict (some were poor, some were well off) and economics (some were buyers, some were sellers). A last point: both in Mexico and in El Salvador, the demonstrators used the by now very well known method of beating one's pans, pots and casseroles - what we call in Spanish *caceroleo*, "casseroling". Now this method was introduced in Chile in 1973 against Allende. The point is quite important, because it shows you that collective actions based on women's food awareness are not always on the side we'd like them to be. In fact, this awareness can be and has been more or less easily manipulated by the establishment.

SIXTH LEVEL

Women demonstrators can under certain circumstances leave their districts - and that means the social networks they are familiar with - and reach the very center of power. The most salient contemporary case in Latin America is the mother movement in Buenos Aires, Argentina. This movement, as you probably know, aims at getting reliable information about the destiny of one's children under the dictatorship. Demonstrations of this kind have nothing to do with food - not in a direct way - but they are nevertheless very interesting as an illustration of the astonishing organizational power of women. So for instance, we know that the dictators had issued a prohibition concerning any sort of

occupation of public places ; yet it seems that the Argentinian mothers either didn't know that or just didn't care. They simply went and occupied the central square - the famous Plaza de Mayo - and made their complain loud and clear for everybody. And in Mexico we have Rosario Ibarra, a brave woman that has not only been received by every President in turn, but that was even postulated some years ago as a candidate for Presidency - which is quite a mouthful. Now with respect to food, collective actions that reach the center of power of a large city are also known to happen. So for example, Tomma Kaplan reports that in 1918 women in Barcelona (Spain) mobilized to the point of seeing the Governor of Catalunya personally and of asking him to do something about inflation (1).

SEVENTH LEVEL

In the liberated regions of El Salvador every man and quite a few women are in war against the troops lead by the old landowners' mercenaries. And all the time, the rest of the women work in the fields and protect them at the same time against the enemy's forays. Quite a case of having one hand in the plough and a rifle - or a machine-gun - in the other hand.

EIGHTH LEVEL

The same thing as above, but in an extreme form, is happening in Nicaragua, where besides defence work women have become responsible for food distribution across the country. Here it is the whole country that has been liberated, and so the enemy is more clearly defined. It may be possible to think that the trouble in El Salvador is national - or even regional in a sense - but in Nicaragua this is not the case any more. If there is a context in which the fashionable talk about food as a problem of "national safety" is justified, this context is Nicaragua. Although things have never been easy for people in Central America since the colonial times - when the Spanish Crown forbade all countries there

(1) "Female Consciousness and Collective Action : The Case of Barcelona, 1910-1918". In : *Feminist Theory. A Critique of Ideology*, ed. by Nannerl O. Keohane, Michelle Z. Rosaldo and Barbara C. Gelpi. Chicago : University Press, 1983. (Originally published in *Signs : Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 7, 1982).

to trade among themselves - the situation has considerably worsened, because now the terms are more radical than ever : "If we (that is, the landowners, the American companies, etc.) are not to have hegemony over the entire zone, then nobody will, because we'll destroy everything". The message is now quite clear, and women have got the message you could say almost overnight. And they are acting upon that.

These are the eight levels I think we can work with for a start. Or maybe we could distinguish yet a ninth level of women's getting active in the defense of food, namely if what I have heard about the foundation of an International Milk League is right, I mean if the label is up to the thing, which I don't know.

Well, this eight-level (or nine-level) structure I have proposed and illustrated here could be a help for analysis - it certainly cannot be a substitute for it. The analysis, and the political theory we urgently need to account for all these facts, cannot be formulated yet, at least not by me and not now. All the same, I want to propose three questions that should be answered by *any* theory.

FIRST QUESTION

It is clear from the facts that the levels proposed are not in general *stages*. That is, you don't find first the one and then the next as a *consequence* of it. Events at different levels seem to happen in a disarticulated manner. Why is that so ?

SECOND QUESTION

This is really a two-side question. Women don't always participate in collective actions, even when the situation is really bad. Why don't they ? And again : Why do they (when they do participate) ?

THIRD QUESTION

When women do mobilize, they don't always do so in an orderly fashion. So for instance, the mass assaults at supermarkets in Brazil were quite spontaneous, even wild. On the other hand, there are levels where the actions are not only orderly, they are highly organized. Why do these things happen one way or the other ?

I suppose it is clear that the second question is the central one; so I am going to concentrate on it. Not that I have an answer ; like to make some suggestions as to what sorts of factors seem to me to be involved. I'll tackle first the question : How is it possible that women get mobilized in collective actions of whatever import ?

FIRST FACTOR

We ought to be aware of the part played by informal relations within social networks at local level. This comes out very nicely in the sort of analysis offered by Temma Kaplan. It opened my eyes to the fact that some of the astonishing things I knew were happening in Latin America were not exclusive of our own times. Women don't organize in general because some boss, eventually a male one, comes along and organizes them ; rather women are always organized *already*. The importance of informal relations becomes especially clear when we see that women participate in actions like the occupation of the central square of Buenos Aires - in spite of official and even military prohibitions.

SECOND FACTOR

In many cases there is a strong tradition of uprising, accompanied by lots of practical empirical knowledge. That was, for instance, the case in Soyatlan, where the Indians have been trying for many years now to get their lands back.

THIRD FACTOR

Certain individual personalities may play a considerable part in the process ; such women are not only intelligent and brave, but they have cultivated these natural talents by means of what can only be called everyday political work outside the party organizations. They are in a sense natural leaders ; and a thing that must be mentioned here : those leaders are in many cases just the spark that sets it all aflame. I have seen with my own eyes how ordinary housewives that had never thought of working politically, suddenly start making very daring proposals of action, proposals that went far beyond anything the leaders were saying. This all can happen in emergency meetings.

FOURTH and LAST FACTOR

We should not neglect the importance of the shock of experiences such as were and are lived through by many women in countries like El Salvador or Nicaragua. Women can develop awareness with an almost supernatural speed (incidentally, this question of speed could be the beginning of an answer to our first question).

Now, why don't women *always* mobilize when a situation reaches its peak ? There are many factors here as well, and I think we could organize some of them in such a way that they are directly opposed to the above-mentioned factors of mobilization ; but all in all I prefer to have a different list.

In many cases there is simply too much pressure from the State. The State is a monster - we know that - a cold monster, omnipresent and invisible at the same time. I'll give you two different examples of this from Guadalajara, the city I am now living in. In popular districts there are everyday police raids devised to frighten people. The immediate target is usually young men prowling in the streets - young men, which means children and brothers of women. It is a terrible situation; and only in some cases have we been able to put up some sort of civil defence against such raids. Another example : Food is concentrated in Guadalajara in a large market that is practically far from everywhere. I cannot imagine what sort of local collective actions would be possible if this kind of centralization was not there. But people in Government are very shrewd about such things.

There is not yet a clear consciousness of social justice. In many cases the old Christian concept of charity is still very much alive. And Governments are always doing their part to maintain this way of thinking. So for example, when a given situation becomes frankly unbearable, the ruling classes of Mexico (and I expect of other countries) come up with some action that show you that "they are not so bad after all"; these drops of compassion have a paralysing effects on people, especial-

ly on women, especially on Catholic women. Together with the above tactics, this is the old method of "carrot and stick".

There is also the infinite complexity and null transparency of official mechanisms. This is of course a full stop to many collective actions, but it is especially relevant in the case of women. For women, at least in Latin America, have in general no idea of what a lawyer or a court is, or whom to go to, when you have to complain. And if you find you want to speak to that guy or the other, you will very often be told that there are many people in between. Now, because of all this, the presence of a male leader is quite commonly needed ; and this has at least a delaying effect on collective actions of women. The situation is not even Kafkaesque, because in Kafka's novels you find at least some sort of solidarity among the people living near the Castle or working in the court-rooms, but the real cities of this world are so big that women are beginning to lose their ancestral awareness of communal life (Women's ignorance of State mechanisms can of course, under certain circumstances, be an asset rather than an obstacle, as the case of the Argentinian mothers show).

It is a fact - a very sad fact indeed - that the progressive political parties haven't as yet enough understanding for the specific plights of women. Party leaders still think that the problem is just seizing power, and once power is seized women's condition will change like everything else - it's all in the process, they say. But *we* know it isn't that easy. Incidentally, this is not only relevant for women ; it is at least as much for the parties themselves - a fact that, for example, in Argentina begins slowly to enter into people's heads : you may know that the whole Argentinian labour movement after the dictatorship began to regroup and re-organize around the mothers' movement ! Just think of it.

I want to be a little more general and insist on a point that is fundamental in the construction of any theory of these things. Temma Kaplan uses the concept of "female consciousness". By that she means

the consciousness women have acquired over the centuries as a consequence of the sexual division of labour. Women have been historically assigned a number of roles that they feel to be their responsibility. This responsibility has to do very centrally with food : as housewives they are immediately responsible to their husbands and children - food must always be there. And things like high prices or food shortage simply *block* the fulfilling of their duty. Women have a more immediate awareness of such problems than their husbands or children because of the sexual division of labour. Husbands and children often don't see the problem ; they don't think it is their business at all ; and they even *accuse* their wives or mothers of not doing things properly. This is, in essence, the general mechanism that brings women into the streets - it is a problem, as Kaplan says, of a conflict between women's duties and the rights (especially the right to access to food) that should go together with the duties. And what I would like to call Kaplan's paradox is : *that the most reactionary thing in the world - this assignment of roles to women - hides in itself the most revolutionary potential.*

Now Temma Kaplan is very much aware that this "female consciousness" of which she speaks has many dimensions. It has not only to do with food, as her examples very aptly illustrate. And that is one reason why I wanted to mention the Argentinian mothers here. I would like to think that "female consciousness" is another label for what I use to call women's *life awareness* or women's *sense of life* - life as a whole that should be protected at any cost. And more important yet : this sense of life is *collective* - it covers all life, the life of everybody, as Nicaraguan and Salvadorean women are showing.

On the other hand, I also think that the understanding of the potential for action that is latent in this sense of life should be incorporated into a theory that deals with the interaction of the two kinds of cycles which the human female lives in and through. Women's life is cyclical. That seems to be one of those commonplaces we are tired of hearing about. And it *is* a commonplace indeed, so long as you just think of the *natural* cycle, the cycle that is based on fertility and has species reproduction as its aim. But there is *another* cycle in women's life that is not so obvious. It is not natural at all, it is *historical*. Take the labour market for instance : women are thrown into it all of a sudden, and they are thrown out of it, sometimes quite unexpectedly. It all depends on ... on what ? Well, that is *one* question for theory.

Or take the household : at times you have to do all the work, and then again only a part ; or you have to do things that your grandmother or great-grandmother didn't, or else the whole housework is altered, acquires another meaning, another function, other dimensions. This is happening all the time and everywhere. And *it* has not to do with species reproduction, or at least not so directly.

Or course, species reproduction is not all that natural. It is important not to forget that, even from the purely biological viewpoint, reproduction doesn't end with childbirth, rather it *begins* there. You have to care for your children. And not only that. The patriarchal structures demand from you that you take care of your husband, too - you in a sense inherit that duty directly from your husband's mother. Well, economically, species reproduction is just another name for what in Marxist theory is called the reproduction of the labour power. But I don't want to become too technical or to enter into theoretical disputes. I hope you understand what I mean.

The other cycle is completely different, because it means women's entering directly into the "normal" economic process, I mean the process that even male chauvinists recognize as the real thing. And we need a theory to account for both cycles and for their interaction. Only within such a framework can we hope to achieve full understanding of the causes of women's collective actions.

Finally, we should not forget that there is a space between the reproductive cycle and the market fluctuations. Many people still think that market economics simply obliterates - or will sometime in the future obliterate - domestic economics. Now we have to be aware that this just isn't true. There are lots of things women are doing and will always do which are a contribution to economics in the standard, "male", sense of the word : domestic horticulture, animal raising, food conservation - medicinal or dietary use of herbs and plants, etc.

Well, this theory of cycles remains to be done and I just wanted to point it out. I would like to finish with some tasks we should tackle in practical way in order to enhance the action potential of women all over the world. Some of them are aimed at enhancing communication and others at enhancing organization.

On the one hand, then, we have to work towards making more explicit and especially more *public* the experiences women are living through; more and more women should be able to hear from other women that are

having the same troubles. Hand in hand with this, we must try and abstract from those experiences the philosophical principles that have guided and inspired women's actions ; we ought to try and create the universal symbols that would express women's yearning for a better life for everyone.

On the other hand, we have to work towards finding new forms of social participation, and especially those based on informal relations within social networks. At the same time, we should bear in mind that local demands have to be articulated with regional, national and international ones ; we need to build a network of information and organization that covers all possible levels.

I expect some of you are thinking this is all very nice, but too general ; the question is : How can we do it ? About this I'd like to say that it would be a grave mistake if we think that our intellectual condition gives us any sort of superiority over the ordinary working women. The important thing is to contact all those women that work and suffer and to learn from them.

To resume : if we don't want to stay backwards and condemn ourselves to inanity we have to join our efforts to those of thousands of women that are NOW beginning to make history - a new history that will be different from all past history in that, life being under equal conditions in every place of the world, it will be understood by any and every woman to be at the end of the road.

WOMEN'S LIFE AWARENESS AND THE FOOD CONNECTION : SOME LATIN AMERICA CASES

Levels of women's collective actions

1. Isolated arguments with tradesmen ; it happens everyday and everywhere.
2. Co-ops ; they get started often and in many places.
3. Isolated robberies at supermarkets ; it happened simultaneously in several Mexican towns.
4. Mass assaults at supermarkets in Brazil, at milk lorries in Mexico ; armed defence of invaded lands in Mexico.
5. Public demonstrations at district level in Mexico, El Salvador and Chile.
6. Public demonstrations at town level in Argentina and Barcelona (1918).
7. Armed defence of liberated regions in El Salvador.
8. Armed defence of lands and food distribution in Nicaragua.
9. The International Milk League ?

Questions

1. Why are the above levels disarticulated ?
2. Why do women mobilize or not mobilize ?
3. Why do women act sometimes spontaneously and sometimes in a highly organized and deliberate way ?

Elements of analysis

1. a) Informal relations within social networks at local level.
b) Pre-existing traditions ; practical knowledge.
c) Individual leadership.
d) Existence of border situations : "you cannot but do it".
2. a) Omnipresence of the State.
b) Lack of the concept of social justice.
c) Complexity and obscurity of State mechanisms ; bigness of cities.
d) Insufficient understanding by political parties.
3. Kaplan's explanation : conflict between inherited responsibilities and absence of the corresponding rights.

Towards a theory of women's cycles

1. The natural cycle of species reproduction and its economic significance.
2. Women's insertion into market economics and the fluctuations of the market.
3. Women's activities bridging the above.

Proposals for contemporary political practice

1. Enhancing of communication : give more explicitness and publicity to women's experiences all over the world ; work out the philosophy and rhetorics of those experiences.
2. Enhancing of organization : find new forms of participation ; widen the horizons of women's fighting.

RÉSUMÉ

Une réflexion générale sur différents contextes dans lesquels les femmes réagissent devant une situation critique en rapport avec la possibilité de survie de la famille et/ou du groupe. Quelques cas en relation - directe ou indirecte - avec l'alimentation sont décrits. La question centrale est la suivante : pourquoi et dans quelles situations la femme répond de façon organisée ou spontanée, et dans quelles situations il n'y a pas de capacité de réponses ; quels types de facteurs objectifs et subjectifs rendent possible ou non cette organisation.

Dans cette réflexion politique l'auteur essaie de mettre en rapport quelques éléments de la vie quotidienne de la femme avec d'autres éléments d'ordre structurel.

ABSTRACT

A general reflection on various contexts within which women respond to a critical situation related to the chances of survival for the family and/or the group. A few cases having a direct or indirect relation to food are described. The pivoted question is why and under which circumstances the women respond in an organized or spontaneous fashion, and in which situations there is no reactive capacity ; which types of objective and subjective factors are, or not, conducive to such organization ?

In this political reflection, the author attempts to interlink certain elements of women's daily life with other elements of a structural nature.