

PRACTICE NOTE

Recognizing Suffering or Resistance? Honoring the Courage of Indigenous Quechua Women in Post Conflict Ayacucho, Peru

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Based on extensive field work in Ayacucho, the area most affected by the past armed conflict in Peru (1980–2000), this practice note outlines some of the contributions to justice and reconciliation made by Quechua women in post-conflict Ayacucho and hypothesizes a number of reasons why these contributions have not been recognized to the same extent as their suffering.

Introduction

The Peruvian armed conflict (1980–2000) was an unambiguous example of a targeted occurrence of violence where ‘death and disappearances were disproportionately distributed by geography, class, and ethnicity’ (Theidon 2006: 437). Indeed, the indigenous population – in particular Quechua-speaking peasants – constituted the majority of the victims of the conflict, but gender differences must be considered as well. While indigenous men were killed and disappeared, women were subjected to extreme sexual violence and other instances of brutality and hostility by both sides. Despite this, Quechua women were responsible for the most courageous acts of resistance, as well as extraordinary efforts to restore peace in the region. They became courageous fighters defending the human rights of their fami-

lies, those disappeared, and killed, a fight they continue to this day. However, their contributions to social repair in post-conflict Peru have had limited public recognition due to their position at the margins of Peruvian society. Although some aspects of this conflict certainly represent distinctive circumstances that cannot be generalized, the lessons learned might not all be exclusive. Based on extensive field work in Ayacucho, the area most affected by the conflict, this practice note outlines some of the contributions to justice and reconciliation made by Quechua women in post-conflict Ayacucho and hypothesizes a number of reasons why these contributions have not been recognized to the same extent as their suffering.

Background

The Peruvian armed conflict mainly involved factions of the rebel group, *Sendero Luminoso* (Shining Path), who attempted to overthrow the government on behalf of the underprivileged; and the Peruvian armed forces, who responded fiercely to this upris-

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ing while also supporting local peasant self-defense units, known as *rondas campesinas*. The conflict started in the Andean region and initially was not acknowledged by the more developed coastal areas. It was only when the violence reached Lima, the capital city, that the conflict acquired nationwide relevance. An examination of local discourses reveals clear differences in the regional narratives of this conflict: in the Coastal area it was often known as 'terrorism'; in Ayacucho and the large Andean region it was called in Quechua the '*sasachakuy tiempo*' (difficult times). As previously mentioned, the conflict typifies racially and gender-targeted violence, whereby 75% of the 69, 280 people dead and disappeared were male, indigenous and young. In addition, more than 80% of women who reported sexual violence were indigenous – the majority of them Quechua women (*Comisión de la Verdad y Reconciliación* (CVR) 2003).

More than 600,000 people from the Andean region were also forced into displacement during those years (White 2009). While *Sendero Luminoso* was responsible for 54% of the deaths of victims, the liability for sexual violence was reversed, with *Sendero Luminoso* responsible for 11% of reported cases of rape, and the state forces for 85% (CVR 2003) making the prosecution of perpetrators extremely difficult.

The above statistics reiterate the historically persistent discrimination against the Indigenous peasant population in Peru since colonial times. Although the conflict exacerbated the marginalization of the Andean region, this situation has not changed since the end of hostilities. In fact, even amidst an economic boom in the country, provinces with a majority population of Indigenous people continue to have lower levels of income and education than the rest of the country. For instance, the poverty level of the Andean highlands is 56.2%, compared with the Coastal region rate of 21.3% (*Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas e Informática* (INEI) 2010). The areas with a majority of indig-

enous peoples are the poorest: for instance, the Andean department of Huancavelica has the highest level of poverty at 77.2%, and Ayacucho, our area of interest, ranked 4th with an overall level of poverty of 62.6%, including 32% living in extreme poverty (INEI 2010). These statistics clearly indicate the unequal distribution of income in Peru despite recent economic growth. Moreover, disaggregated statistics have shown that indigenous women are in an even more disadvantaged position, with higher rates of illiteracy, poverty, and unemployment than their male counterparts (INEI 2010). In spite of these inequalities, ethnographic work in post-conflict Ayacucho (Gamarra 2009; Theidon 2006; Trigos, Lagos and Huamani 2006) and the author's own field research (Suarez 2011; 2012) indicate that Quechua women, while indeed the target of extreme violence during the conflict, were and continue to be astonishingly resilient and actively involved in the social reconstruction process of their communities.

Quechua Women Search for Justice

Numerous associations of victims and displaced were created after the end of the conflict in Peru, but the courageous pioneer was the National Association of Families of the Kidnapped, Detained and Disappeared of Peru (ANFASEP), whose brave founders risked their lives and safety to publicly denounce and protest the disappearances and killings of civilians in Ayacucho during the most violent years of the *sasachakuy tiempo*. ANFASEP is a grass roots association that made public the violence and human rights violations in Ayacucho to national and international audiences. In July 1983, 'Mama' Angelica (Señora Angelica Mendoza) and other courageous Quechua women in Ayacucho started meeting at the door of the army fortress '*Los Cabitos*' at the office of the city prosecutor, and even at body dumps, while searching frantically for their husbands, sons, daughters, and other loved ones who had disappeared. In the midst of this turmoil, and in

spite of the risk to their own lives, they came together to create ANFASEP on September 2, 1983. From its beginning, the organization's primary tasks were to demand justice for the disappeared and their families and to unite and support victims from both sides of the conflict, tasks they continue to carry out today, almost 30 years later. Similarly, other organizations led by Quechua women in Ayacucho and other Andean provinces bravely defended their communities and families from the violence, in particular the *Club de Madres* (Mother's Clubs: government-supported, self-organized daycares), the *Federaciones de Mujeres Campesinas* (Federations of Peasant Women) and the Associations of Merchants of Food Markets (Trigos, et al 2006). Individual testimonies of courage and resistance have also been documented extensively (Gamarra 2009).

The resilience of these brave women – how they survive and often thrive – is hard to explain by views that theorize social resilience as resulting from the interaction of adaptive and/or protective systems and individual resources (Berkes and Folke 1998). In fact, these women were illiterate, poor, and lacked protection from all relevant social systems, notably legal and political establishments. Conversely, this scenario is consistent with discourses of resilience based on human agency, where people creatively pursue viable options to respond to threats (Bohler, Etzold, and Keck 2009), in this case to their human rights, without counting on protection from external actors or resources (Chandler 2012). Furthermore, it showcases the impact on powerful social arrangements that individual and marginal agencies can achieve (Richmond 2011). For instance, the courage of Quechua women denouncing the violence in Ayacucho eventually influenced how the government forces engaged with the indigenous communities and made them to some extent accountable for the disappearance of civilians and episodes of mass violence. They used multiple strategies to advance this cause, from rallying and protest-

ing, to developing alliances with sympathetic civil authorities, lawyers, religious leaders and international peace activists. The efforts of ANFASEP and other grassroots groups in bringing together victims from both sides of the conflict also initiated the process of reconciliation in Ayacucho. These contributions have rarely been recognized.

Recognition of Suffering or Recognition of Contribution?

On June 18, 2012, the collective lawsuit against the army '*caso Cabitos 1983*' of persons who disappeared in that year finally got its first court appearance in the city of Ayacucho, with two former army officers, who had commanded the fortress at that time, standing trial. 'Mama' Angelica Mendoza de Ascarza, now 85 years of age, and her husband were first to declare, on behalf of their son, Arquimedes, who was 19 years old when he disappeared. Just a week before, 'Mama' Angelica received a medal from the Ombudsman's Office, honouring her uninterrupted fight for justice from the day her youngest son was taken by a group of soldiers in July of 1983. Why did this recognition come almost thirty years later?

Several explanations attempt to answer this question. First, transitional justice mechanisms, such as truth commissions, usually emphasize reparations based on victimhood. The *Comisión de la Verdad y Reconciliación* (Peruvian Truth and Reconciliation Commission (CVR)) was not an exception, prioritizing reparations utilizing a human rights-based framework. However, almost ten years after the final report of the CVR, disappointment in the inaccessibility of reparations, as well as in the lack of prosecutions remains high. In response, a new *Plan Integral of Reparations* (Comprehensive Plan of Reparations (PIR)) was established in November 2011. Yet, as Jemina Garcia-Godos (2008) argues, when examining the crucial role of the '*ron-das campesinas*' in ending the conflict, the reparations articulated by the PIR are also based on the recognition of suffering, failing

to offer an adequate frame for the recognition of contributions. Second, while initially activism and resistance were the responses of indigenous communities in the face of the atrocities they were exposed to, and fostering resilience was the focus of local community workers (CODINFA 2002), gradually a trauma-framework permeated psychosocial services in Ayacucho. A trauma-focused model of assistance is primarily concerned with supporting the healing of individual suffering caused by war in order to prevent new occurrences of violence. The risk associated with the dominance of a trauma-framework is that it often generates the need of a 'trauma victim' identity in order to access services (James 2010). It is recognized that a trauma-framework can certainly attend to the needs of a number of traumatized individuals, but this approach has also been criticized for reducing the access to local traditions of healing and, most importantly, for diverting scarce resources from addressing the roots of conflicts (Pupavac 2001; Summerfield 2005). In this case, it may have also obscured the contributions of women who, despite intense suffering, also display remarkable resilience (Suarez 2013). The deterministic 'trauma *viktin*' framework (James 2010) risks disempowering women in post-conflict contexts not only by silencing their contributions but also diverting attention from the dynamics of gender and race relations that call for social interventions (Hume 2009). Third, in war affected contexts that subjugate women and their survival to a secondary position, in spite of their daring resistance and contributions to social repair, women's agency is often rendered invisible. As Bandarage (2010: 664) stated 'post conflict policy planning needs to take into account women's multiple and complex roles as "war widows," household heads, perpetrators, peacemakers, and peace negotiators.' The courage and activism of Quechua women in Ayacucho is certainly an eloquent example of those complex roles and contributions.

Conclusions

After 30 years of continually searching for justice, some responses are finally emerging for members of ANFASEP, but there is still much progress to be made. This author attended 'Los Cabitos 1983' trial in June 2012 and was struck by the fact that while a number of local residents and NGOs supported the demandants and witnesses, this historic trial was barely noticed by the national media. This reaction is not surprising; during the conflict, mainstream Peruvian society and elites in the capital city reacted mainly with disbelief and/or indifference to the mass violence that they did not experience directly (Laplante & Rivero 2006). While the extreme violence towards the indigenous population ended more than a decade ago, discrimination and injustice undeniably persist. A major contribution of the CVR was indeed the identification of high levels of historical discrimination, subordination and oppression against the Indigenous population as the major underlying cause of the violence (CVR 2003). Whether the CVR has been able to foster a collective record of the past has not yet been determined. To be legitimate, this narrative should include the suffering as well as the ongoing resistance and contributions of Quechua women and other affected groups in the aftermath of the Peruvian conflict. Research is needed from the perspective of women survivors of war, who are typically seen first as victims, rather than as agentic social actors in post-conflict situations (Borer, 2009). Nevertheless, the active presence of women in post-conflict zones, not only as victims of violence, but also as liberators, leaders, warriors and caretakers of families and communities, has been reported elsewhere: in Liberia (Utas 2005); Sri Lanka (Bandarage 2010); Uganda (Abel and Richters 2009) and Rwanda (Zraly and Nyirazinyoye 2010), to cite a few examples. While the implications of this analysis undoubtedly cross disciplinary boundaries, they speak closely to gender-specific social policies and psycho-

social programming in post-conflict situations, which too often focus on victimhood and/or alleviating distress, while being disengaged from the strengths and capabilities of women survivors of war and the injustice that often surrounds their lives in times of peace and war.

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