

CIMCA:

Women's Popular Education in Bolivia

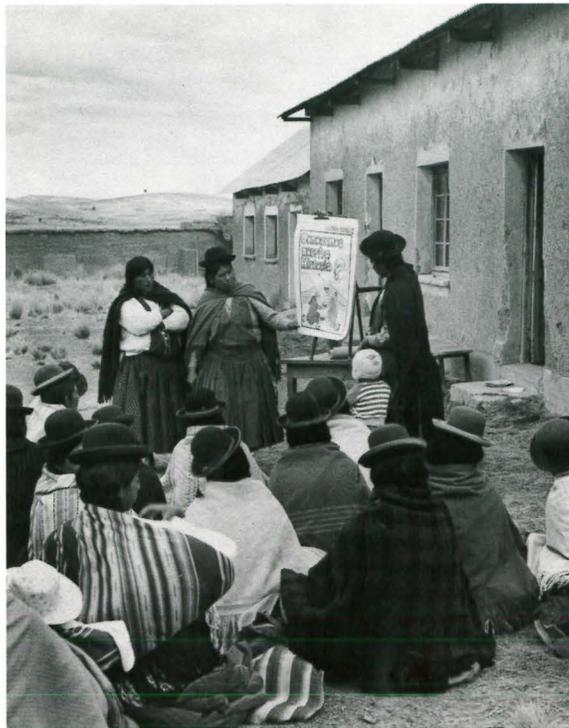
For Bolivian Aymara and Quechua Indian herders and farmers, who live on the treeless, windswept Oruro plains 13,000 ft. above sea level, life is not easy. A national economic crisis in the 1980s devastated the region, reducing sheep herds, shriveling markets for small farmers' cash crops, and throwing thousands of tin miners out of work. Men migrated in increasing numbers, leaving their women relatives to care for small family farms and eke out a living from them. One campesina said, "We work, but no one sees. It's always the mothers and their daughters who are expected to look after the sheep. Who are the real sheep here anyway?"

Traditional forms of Andean society rest on a kind of participatory democracy with rotating leadership and reciprocal social obligations, from which, however, women have become excluded to varying degrees. Contemporary rural development agencies also have frequently failed to recognize the important economic roles of women and provide them needed support. For the last 11 years, Centro de Capacitación Integral de la Mujer Campesina, known as CIMCA, has been working with communities to help empower women and to strengthen and reform organizations by broadening their membership base to include women.

With educational strategies based on the work of the influential Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, CIMCA creates its program in collaboration with local communities. As co-founder Evelyn Barrón explains, "Our educational method is a circular process of recovering, ordering, and returning native culture." While learning to make and use puppets, to play a variety of educational board games, and to act in sociodramas, community members probe the exploitation and humiliation they experience within the community as women and within the larger society as Indians. CIMCA also trains *educadoras populares*, or "community educators," who bring CIMCA's program to their home communities. CIMCA's objective is not to provide answers but to teach people how to raise questions.

Overcoming deeply entrenched barriers to reach and mobilize rural women is perhaps the single most difficult task in development. CIMCA's success in this area is exemplified by Flora Rufino, a CIMCA graduate. "First by joining, then by leading group discussions, I have learned how to talk with, not at, people. Now I can speak clearly and forcefully in public. I have the skills to keep minutes or to run a meeting, and I know how to analyze issues in ways that enable the community to inform itself about national as well as local problems." CIMCA has aided women's rights and ethnic empowerment and has inspired the people of Oruro to uncover community cultural resources with which they can shape their own future and prepare for that of their children.

— Kevin "Benito" Healy



Women study the first in a series of posters labeled "Do we know our history?" It depicts an Aymara couple making a libation to the mountain. Standing to one side and pointing to the poster, the discussion leader asks, "What is going on here in this one? What does it mean?"

Photo by Fernando Soria, courtesy Inter-American Foundation