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From Rio Grande To Patagonia—Latin American Women Filling Political Void Left By Men

by Barbara Khol
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[The following article was released by the Pacific News Service. The LADB has authorization from PNS for reproduction.] By Madeline Kiser * Che Guevara meet Mariela Sala. Two years ago Sala turned in her reporter's notebook to take charge of 70 "rebellious mothers and grandmothers" and the chain of kitchens, clinics and classrooms they run throughout Peru. But as director of Centro Flora Tristan, Latin America's largest grass-roots organization for women, this mother of two doesn't talk about "revolution." She hates to think about the future. She doesn't plan for more than two months at a time. "In Lima people talk about a crazy man who runs around cutting out children's eyes," Sala says. "Listening to them, I think 'a country that has no eyes has no hope.' But then I realize, even if there is no hope there is life and there is work." Women all over Latin America are coming to the same conclusion. Even as the region sinks deeper into debt and political parties of the left run out of steam, wives and mothers from the Rio Grande to Patagonia are forming their own "invisible revolution," according to writers, community organizers and professionals from the region. The group convened at a recent conference on "Women of the Americas," sponsored by the Center for Latin American Studies at the University of California, Berkeley. "We are talking about child care centers and laundromats," says Guillermina Valdes, a mother of three and community organizer from Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, who works with women all along the US-Mexico border. "Women take a practical approach to life. They may plant 25,000 trees in two days in their home town but they aren't talking 'environmental issues.' They're simply saying, 'I need to see green.'" At the end of the 1980s women throughout the region watched their standard of living slide in the face of spiraling inflation. "You need two and a half times the income to buy what you could buy with your earnings in 1980," says Valdes. "Once we realized that no one was going to do anything about this, it was a whole new ball game. We documented the change through drawings we asked women to make about their lives. At first they drew trees without leaves. Now you see pines reaching out, struggling." Women also took to the streets in the mid-1980s to protest the torture and disappearance of their husbands and children. "At the forefront of the human rights movement in Latin America you find women," says Rodolfo Stavenhagen, a leading human rights activist from Mexico. "At one point it was too dangerous, too obvious for men to take the lead. So women did and the experience mobilized them." As the women tell it, they had little choice but to move into the public realm. They portray the region's leaders mostly men sitting around tables grappling with intractable problems like Mexico City's sewer system, the debt crisis, the collapse of socialism, while the continent crumbles around them. The women see themselves, in the words of Mexican journalist Marisa Belaustegui-goita, as "filling empty spaces" created by the decline of the left. *In small towns along the US-Mexico border women organizers are literally taking over empty city lots to build community centers, parks and nursery schools; *In Argentina, the women of the Plaza de Mayo who led the campaign against their country's "dirty war" have recently formed support groups for battered wives; *In Bolivia, women textile workers who organized a series of strikes have stayed together when the strikes ended to work on neighborhood improvement projects; *In Peru, the Centro Flora Tristan now sponsors union health clinics, rural literacy programs, a campaign to
legalize abortion after rape, and a women's magazine, VIVA. "By sticking to the concrete details of daily life, women are helping us find new directions as we work our way through the greatest crisis since the Conquest," says Eduardo Gonzalez Viana, a popular Peruvian novelist. Adds Mexico's Stavenhagen, "The breakdown of the technocratic, bureaucratic, patriarchal models in the region typically associated with men is allowing women but not just women to rethink society overall." Women are the first to point out the dangers of the political transformation they are spearheading. They worry about how to handle their new power. "There is a reluctance among the women we work with to take power if it causes friction," says Guillermina Valdes. "Women are getting involved in governing not for themselves, but for their families." Other women speak of colleagues who have risen in traditional government jobs or political parties and who have become corrupted in the process. "Women who have become successful in Mexico's ruling party, the PRI, still speak with the voice of the PRI, not their own," says Josefina Vasquez, a history professor at the Colegio de Mexico. And if mothers have sacrificed their time and energy to improving their home towns they worry that their daughters will not continue their work. Guillermina Valdes recalls, "One of my daughters said to me, 'I've already done my work by giving you time' for organizing and meetings. She was only half-joking." There are contradictions. According to Mariela Sala, "The wives of Lima policemen took to the streets to protest their husbands' low salaries. These are the same policemen who several years ago threw women in jail for publicly demanding that Peruvian children receive free milk." * PNS associate editor Madeline Kiser, who lived and worked for several years in Central America, is an associate of the Center for Latin American Studies at the University of California, Berkeley.

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