



A Passion for Radio
Radio Waves and Community
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Chapter 11

The Feminist Radio Collective of Peru: Women... on the air

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I still laugh when I remember. We were in a meeting in Lima, at Las Manueles, discussing what the radio station would be like – our radio station. We came from Iquitos, from Cajamarca, from the north and from the south, from the jungle, the mountains, the coast ... from all over Peru. And there was something of everything: radio producers, journalists, feminist intellectuals, communications experts and, as a bonus, a publicist.

- The radio must represent all women’s ways of thinking.
- But let’s not forget a gender perspective...

Discussions and discussions. And just when one of us was summing up the day’s conclusions, right at the best part of her speech, click, the cassette ran out. When it clicked, five of us jumped up to turn it over. When we got to the tape recorder that we were recording everything with, all five of us looked at each other. Nobody knew what to do, nobody knew how to work the blessed thing. How embarrassing! Great communicators, but we just stood there. After the confusion we all burst out laughing, the Miss Fix-its and the on-lookers. Moral of the day – you have to begin at the beginning.

It’s important to think carefully about what a women’s radio station would be like, but you need to come down to earth too. We didn’t know anything about technical stuff and radio is, more than anything else, a technical thing. Philosophy is one thing. Nuts, bolts, plugs, mikes, the knobs on a tape recorder are something else. Some of us knew how to put a programme together, but handling the equipment was a “man’s thing.” We had left it up to them – that’s how discrimination begins.

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We were dreaming about, striving for, a radio of our own.

And we weren't the only ones with this dream. We were joined by Karen and a group of feminists from Denmark who were determined to make the project work. We wanted to set up not one, but three transmitters: in Lima, in Cusco, and in Trujillo. But Peru's a violent place, more and more so. And in that year of '89, after considering the situation, the funding organisation thought it better to wait a bit. Maybe later.

A Peru-Chile regional project had been set up and they decided to begin with the Chile part. Radio Tierra in Santiago, run by the compañeras from La Morada is a result of that project. It was the first feminist radio station in Latin America. So, what about the Peruvians. We didn't have a radio station but we were together: five organisations with some radio experience and a mountain of enthusiasm. Why not keep at it? And that's how the Feminist Radio Collective was born.

Five organisations, each with its own style and flavour. The Flora Tristán Peruvian Women's Centre, named after a great social activist and feminist vanguard of the last century; the Manuela Ramos Movement, whose name isn't taken from any particular woman but represents all poor women; the Calandria Social Communicators Association, which had taken its name from that bird, the bearer of glad tidings, which plays such a symbolic role in Arguedas' writings.¹ These three organisations are from Lima, the capital, but Lima isn't all of Peru. The provinces played a role from the beginning. The compañeras from Trujillo, from the Micaela Bastidas Centre for Women's Advancement, were part of the collective. Micaela was Tupac Amaru's wife and just as revolutionary as he.² And from Cusco, the Amauta Centre for Women's Studies and Advancement, who produce their radio programmes in Quechua.

In fact, we are more than five organisations. Each of our groups is linked to other networks in the country, like the National Network of Rural Women with its twenty radio production teams who work with peasant women. It's strange that here, in spite of everything, more and more groups who work in or want to work in radio are springing up all the time. There is no end to the number of women who want to speak out, to give their opinions, to communicate with one another. I don't know if there are other countries like ours with so many problems and, at the same time, so much desire to speak out. The two are related, aren't they?

Well, we formed a collective. We were together, so now what? We came up with an ambitious plan of action: researching, producing, evaluating, training and everything that ends in 'ing', even vacillating! We wanted to do everything right now. We were raring to go. The truth is that everything was just on paper, all beautiful, all perfect. But, when we started to really get down to work, we found ourselves up against a brick wall. We realised we didn't know very much. We knew each other's names but we had hardly spoken to each other. We knew the names of the radio programmes that each group did, but we hadn't listened to them. Communicators ... incommunicado.

¹ Arguedas is a Peruvian writer. While he writes in Spanish, his best-known work makes use of the rhythms of the indigenous Quechua language.

² Tupac Amaru was an Incan leader murdered by the Spanish.

So, the first thing was to get to know one another, listen to each other's programmes, criticise, evaluate, discover how we messed up, and what our errors were, and what successes we had in common. But we were afraid. More precisely, we were afraid of saying things as we saw them – directly and honestly. So, in order not to hurt anyone, we didn't say anything. But silence made people even more touchy. During that first year there was a lot of mistrust. There were moments of coolness, not to mention heated arguments. But our enthusiasm was greater than all this silliness and, bit by bit, we overcame it.

During this first stage we learned to trust each other, but we didn't produce any programmes as a group. We called ourselves a radio collective, but radio? No way. For the sake of doing something we produced a couple of pamphlets and held a national training workshop. In the workshop we discussed communications theories. We didn't do much concrete. Yes, we had a lot of meetings; up to two a month. And the collective's programmes? Very well, thanks.

Finally, in one of our many planning meetings someone said:

- “It's nearly November.”
- “So?”
- “So November 25th is the Day of Non Violence Against Women.”
- “Right on! We have to do something!”
- “Something equals nothing. What do you suggest?”
- “Listen girls... How about a radio campaign?”

And so, we started to 'do' radio. We started on the smallest scale, public service announcements. We call them “spots”. But not traditional ones. We wanted to do something different, to draw attention. It was our first time in the arena and we wanted to shine. The topics would be the usual; rape, physical and sexual abuse. The challenge would be how we did it. Abstract, disapproving messages, all politically correct, would be no good. Let's be honest. Where do women experience violence? At home, at work, even in religious processions. So we came up with this spot:

SOUND EFFECTS – Women singing in a religious procession

MAN – (pretending) Pray for us sinners...

WOMAN – Hey, mister... What's the matter with you?

MAN – Ave Maria... Ave Mariiiiia...!

WOMAN – I said don't push... You're a real smartass, aren't you? Well, we'll see!

MAN – Oooooow! That hurts..!

ANNOUNCER – The jerks are on the loose. Douse their flame where it causes pain!

They also feel us up on the buses. So, since the lambada was really popular at the time, we hit on the idea of using the same music to warn the nuisances. The slogan was “Remember, men. You don't dance the lambada on a minibus!”

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Some were more light-hearted, some were more serious, but with our spots we were relating major feminist demands to everyday situations; rape, for example. We made one spot about assault and rape in the street and another about the kind that goes on at home. Then there's that taboo subject that scarcely gets talked about: rape committed by husbands when they come home drunk and force themselves on you. Even feminists wondered about those spots – they were a bit violent in their way of denouncing violence. So, what happened? Life is full of surprises, as Pedro Navaja sings. It turned out, when we distributed these announcements, that commercial stations accepted some and not others, according to their format. One station with a sensationalist bent, real redneck, took only two from us, the ones that dealt with rape. “Don't you have any more of these?” they said. “We want action, blood, impact!”

On November 25 those idiots broadcast the two famous spots, the heavy ones. Listener response was immediate. There was an uproar at the station. Women were in support. Men were calling in, mad at the station, accusing the announcers of being traitors, turncoats. There was a huge fuss. The announcers were happy because their ratings went up that day. We were happy too. We wanted people to have opinions, to participate, to think about things.

These spots are like mosquitoes. They sting, they go, they sting again. They're very effective on radio. So much so that when International Women's Day came around we repeated the whole thing.

SOUND – *Scary music and street noises*

MAN – Psst... Psst... Hey, baby.

WOMAN – What's the matter with you?

MAN – What a body, what legs, what curves...

WOMAN – Leave me alone, don't bug me.

MAN – What eyes, what a mouth, what a cutie..!

WOMAN – Cutie? Karate!

(Karate blows from her – howls from him)

ANNOUNCER – For every turkey, there's a Christmas.

The situation in Peru is really difficult. And that's exactly why you have to spice life up a bit, inspire some hope. That March we had been traumatised by the brutal assassinations of popular leaders. Maria Elena Moyano, president of the Villa El Salvador Women's Federation had been one of them. The *Senderistas*³ killed her and blew up her body with dynamite. There were threats, danger was in the air. Faced with this, our programmes, our spots, adopted a different tone. The conditions under which we lived forced us to maintain a difficult balance between humorous messages which give courage to listeners and those which denounce the tragic situation facing our people.

Now the collective is producing radio shows. And by producing – and evaluating – we've realised that we need to learn more. We're conscious of the need to get more training so we can be more professional. We're clear about the feminist line, the theory.

³ Senderistas – Members of *Sendero Luminoso* (Shining Path), a Peruvian guerrilla army.

But we don't know how to communicate it very well. We need a method, a more appropriate format. There's no other way.

We have to learn about everything. As I said, as far as technical stuff goes, we were nowhere. We didn't know if a turntable was for eating off, or for playing records. So, since the Chilean women were training their technicians in order to get Radio Tierra on the air, several of our *compañeras* packed their bags and were off to Santiago. Jimena was one of them and now she's an expert in mixing. She can put in sound effects, lay down music beds, add in whatever she thinks of. There she is, sitting in front of the control board, the Belle of Trujillo.

Now we're organising the third national workshop for women radio producers. The methodology is simple: learn by doing, learn from your errors, or from your "horrors", as Rosita said. You learn to do interviews, socio-dramas, reports, soap operas – not as rigid models, cold, removed from life, but mixing feminist principles with the rules of communication: 'what?' and "how?"

And speaking of communication, we began to be more and more concerned with the public, with the audience. What's happening with our listeners? Are we reaching them? What do we know about them, about their lives, their tastes, their language? Communication has to be two way and perhaps we, in our haste, were going down a one way street. So we've begun to do studies, to research, to learn more about what's going on with women – women in the country, in the city, migrant women. How are we understood by a woman from the sandpits,⁴ living in a straw shack with a child on her back and a pitcher of water on her head. We want to reach them. We want to learn about them. We need to make our programme about them.

This means participation. It's absolutely necessary that the collective becomes a place where women can have their say, where, through the programmes of the various networks, women can hear each other, complain, suggest, tell their troubles and share their joys. I want to emphasise the latter, joy, because there is already enough sadness. And peace, because Peru lives – or survives – amidst violence. There are bullets, but there is also hunger, unemployment, cholera, and repression coming from above and from below.

So here we are, without much experience, but with a lot of desire. Two years' work is really not a lot, and yet it is a lot. It's not an easy thing to create unity, to coordinate, to do things collectively. We want to grow. Now there are five of us. Five is a beginning. We have to continue to make links with other groups of women from all over the country who are involved in radio. We need to make connections outside Peru, with Latin American *compañeras*, or even with women from other continents who are in the same struggle.

We haven't lost the dream that brought us together – our own radio station – because in this society women are always in second place. I remember once a respected communicator asked us, "Why a women's radio station?... Communication is by all and for all. Or do you want to go it alone?"

⁴ Lima is surrounded on three sides by a desert. The sandpits surrounding the city are populated with millions of Peruvian peasants, displaced from their land and looking for work in the city.

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No, it's not a question of going it alone, of separating men and women, not even as a joke! Men work in several of our programmes, as producers, as announcers. We don't want to implement reverse discrimination. But women's experience continues to be silenced and manipulated by the media. If the general public is not aware of this, if women's specific demands do not become the concern of all people, if they are not as popular as the last soap opera or as much discussed as the next soccer game, we're not going anywhere. That's why we formed the feminist radio collective, to engage many women – and many men – in the struggle for women's rights. And that's why the perspective of our programme is a woman's perspective, and so is the control. What are we still, on the TV screen or behind the mike? Decorative objects or advertising come-ons. You can count on one hand the women who run a magazine, a television channel, a radio station.

That's the heart of the matter – power. Who has it? Those who have initiative, ideas, those who make decisions. But also, and most importantly, those who own the media. It's this ownership that must be democratised. That's why we want a women's radio station. To overturn macho history... now that we know how to turn over a cassette!

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