

About Freedom

By Andrea Bigner

A single lightbulb hangs from the ceiling in CARE's tiny micro-credit office in Ancoraimes, Bolivia. Almost four hours from La Paz, this tiny fishing village boasts a successful women's small credit project that began in 1996.

CARE staff member Josefad explains the program. "The credit process is about more than just money. It's an educational process. It is a program that instills confidence in the women who participate in it. It is about freedom - freedom to do more in a day, to do more in life."

Since its earliest days, some 71 women's groups have taken part in the small loans program. Offering small, low-interest loans (rates are some 8 to 24 percent below market), the groups allow women the opportunity to begin or expand small money-making ventures. Selling livestock is the most popular choice.

"The women use the money for commercialization of fishing products, for feeding cattle, for buying tools for fishing and for buying and selling staples like corn, cheese and eggs. The loans start at about \$150 at first. They can gradually increase upon payback. The idea here is that the women will over time learn how to manage the money through practice, not over night. Keep in mind, many of these women never had more than one dollar at a time in their entire life. This is a big responsibility and great opportunity."

A woman with a baby strapped to her back stood in the doorway. Josefad stops mid-sentence to introduce her. "This is Isabel Quispe de Choque and baby Christian. She is a member of the Samkay Pamkaras Chicata women's banking group. She can tell you about this program better than I!"

The name of the group, Samkay Pamkaras Chicata is Aymara for "flower of the cactus." It is a thing of beauty that grows surprisingly well in unlikely, harsh conditions. Like the Samkay Pamkaras Chicata, Isabel's banking group has flourished despite the rural poverty that plagues this vast expanse of Bolivia.

"I remember the first day our group met," Isabel says. "The date was December 5, 1995. I can't forget that day! Before CARE, we were unable to get true loans here. We would have to borrow from others who would ask us to pay back what we borrowed very quickly and with interest so high it seemed impossible. It felt like begging, and our things never felt like ours. It felt like we were borrowing them from someone else. My husband and I felt ashamed about it.



"And just before the bank group began, El Niño had ruined our crops. The potato seeds we planted grew nothing. Also, our animals had died. It was very troubling.

"With CARE, I was able to get a loan, buy pigs and also buy rice, pasta and chickens for my family. The credit really came at a good time for our family."