



Challenges, Barriers, and Strategies for Leadership Among Indigenous, Afro-descendant, and Local Community Women

1. INTRODUCTION

The Rights and Resources Initiative (RRI) is a global coalition dedicated to promoting the recognition and empowerment of the collective rights of Indigenous Peoples (IPs), Afro-descendant Peoples (ADPs), local communities (LCs), and the women and youth within these groups. RRI aims to promote the recognition of territorial rights by employing a variety of strategies, including enhanced coordination among grassroots organizations and publishing analyses on the legal recognition of their rights to forests, lands, and natural resources.

After decades of struggle, some women from IP, ADP, and LC organizations in Latin America have achieved conditions of equality and equity, successfully overcoming instances of violence and/or gender discrimination within their organizations. However, for many others, barriers still exist.

Given women's relevant role in advancing the land rights of IPs, ADPs, and LCs, it is crucial to recognize the strategies devised by women involved in the RRI coalition to promote equal rights and environments free from gender-based violence and discrimination, which is ultimately what enables them to assume their leadership roles. This recognition enables us to gather lessons learned and share these with partner organizations within the RRI network.

As part of RRI's regional strategy in 2023, the coalition agreed to conduct an analysis of the enabling contexts and challenges related to fostering Indigenous, Afro-descendant, and local community women's leadership skills based on the life experiences of three women in Latin America who have achieved leadership roles in their families, organizations, communities, and at the national and international levels. Analyzing the three women leaders' life and leadership trajectories made it possible to identify the enabling conditions and barriers that the women overcame in an effort to make their voices, thoughts, and leadership abilities known in the different types of organizations, and how their leadership has opened doors for other women in their town or community.

While maintaining each person's privacy, the results were presented at a regional meeting with 18 member organizations of the RRI coalition. This meeting addressed structural barriers and how to manage and overcome them; how to take advantage of varying contextual conditions and opportunities to pave the way toward the full recognition of women's leadership capacities; and how to move from exceptional leadership to generalized leadership with an intergenerational approach.

The consultants who participated in this study are **María Elvira Molano**, **María Victoria García Vettorazzi**, and **Eliza Plufcker Herrera**.

COVER PHOTO

► Protest of the Interethnic Association for the Development of the Peruvian Rainforest (AIDESEP). Photo by Elvio Cairuna for AIDESEP.

2. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study was conducted in 2023 as part of RRI's Regional Gender Strategy in Latin America. It analyzes the enabling contexts and challenges related to fostering Indigenous, Afro-descendant, and local community women's leadership skills based on three life stories: An Afro-descendant woman leader from the Colombian Pacific, an Indigenous woman leader from the Peruvian Amazon, and a woman leader from a forest community in Guatemala's Mayan jungle.

A comparative analysis of the three life stories was conducted using four guidelines:

1. Barriers to exercising leadership (identified by the women leaders);
2. Strategies for dealing with these barriers;
3. Lessons learned from overcoming the identified barriers; and
4. Recommendations on how to strengthen Indigenous, Afro-descendant, and local community women's leadership skills.

The main enabling conditions identified for exercising leadership are:

- › Having a grassroots community organization that creates inclusive projects and defends the territory from external groups and disputes over territorial control; and
- › Having national and international support networks that promote women's participation in decision-making and the strengthening of leadership capacities.

The main barriers to exercising leadership are:

- › Rural women's role in terms of household chores limits their participation in training and organizational spaces; and
- › The limited appreciation of women's contributions within community organizations themselves, which distances them from roles involving representation, negotiation, and other forms of leadership.

For centuries, women have relied on family networks to ensure their children's upbringing and their family's care and maintenance while also performing the demanding roles and responsibilities of being a community leader. Many of them have taken advantage of new opportunities that arrived in their territories via international and national programs aiming to strengthen women's participation in community decision-making by teaching them how to use various leadership tools. However, limited access to education increases the gap in access to roles and positions involving representation due to both technical limitations and its negative impact on women's self-esteem. In some cases, families and second-tier organizations have supported training initiatives for women. As a result, many women have started working on boosting their self-confidence and raising their self-esteem in order to fully participate in decision-making spaces and assume leadership roles in their territories.

In conclusion, the identified barriers are intertwined and highlight the colonial and patriarchal heritage in Latin America. Limited access to education, technology, and opportunities for specialization—as well as financial and job insecurity—impact Indigenous, Afro-descendant, and local community women's ability to perform leadership roles. Nonetheless, women leaders have consistently been willing to learn and develop social and emotional skills in response to changing situations and relationships. Dialogue is a fundamental skill and strategy for strengthening knowledge as well as for advocacy processes and women



► Latin America Women Retreat. Tejiendo Juntas. April 2024.
Photo by ALDEA for RRI.

should be empowered to participate in broader organizational networks leading to exchanges and a wider range of knowledge. Women’s capacity building needs to be comprehensively supported using distinct approaches according to appropriate sociopolitical and cultural contexts. Lastly, the coalition’s organizational leadership needs to be strengthened to further support coalition members’ work and action plans and the coordination and exchange of experiences among peer organizations.

3. TESTIMONIALS

Afro-descendant woman leader

“My fight is rooted in the communities, in my territory, in my home, with my children who are my encouragement, my family, and with those who make me see that what we do together is something real, true, and efficient.”

“Violence did not prevent this process from being strengthened, and today we continue on the front lines defending our territory, our rights, and our hope for peace.”

“I renewed the connection with my people, with the women, with the community, and we created the Women’s Committee after seeing that many of us women got together to go to the river, to wash clothes or pan for gold, to tidy the garden; by carrying out this exercise we call *mano cambiada* (lending a hand)—which is very typical of our culture—we joined together to work.”

“The dialogue we’ve had about the consequences of the conflict—sharing and talking about what has happened to us women—frees us from the scars left on our bodies, our memory, and the territory. This dialogue about the truth is essential for our reparation—and that of the country.”

Forest community woman leader

“If we were not organized, if everyone went their own way, perhaps everything would be destroyed. Maybe even more powerful people would have control of the destroyed areas.”

“Organizations help us learn more, including what’s involved with certain positions, and important issues are discussed, such as political advocacy.”

“We are used to the husband going to work and the wife staying at home.”

“The following year...a new assembly was held, which was when they elected me as president of the association for the first time. I was very scared...because they had already mentioned the men and none of them wanted to take part. And then, they appointed me to participate, and I was silent for a moment, but then I thought, if they’re giving me this opportunity, I’m going to try to be a leader, to see what I can do, to learn, because along the way you learn how to do things. I said, okay, I’m going to try, I’m going to try.”

"When someone came to visit for interviews or something, there were only three of us women in the office. I felt a little sad, but at the same time it gave me courage. We encouraged each other, and they teased us because the three of us always showed up. I told my colleagues, 'They can make fun of us all they want, but we are going to be there. We were appointed to the Board of Directors, and no matter what happens, we're on the hook for it.' The good thing is that those ladies



› Community Council La Alsacia. North of Cauca, Colombia. August 2024. Photo by ASOM for RRI.

became members at the same time I became a member. The two of them were from the same time, so the three of us became partners, and we started talking about the issues."

"Not wanting to participate is just how they are, because they have been members for a long time and they do not take on any of the positions. It's not that people don't want them to take on those roles, it's that they don't want to. So, for example, they say 'We appoint so-and-so to be a board member.' And they say, 'No, I don't want to participate'; they don't think, 'Well, ok, they've appointed me, and I'm going to do it.' No. I don't know why, maybe because they are afraid; I don't know what is wrong with them. Some say, 'I can't read, I can't write, what am I going to do?' So we tell them that even if it is participating as a board member, they should participate. I don't think the fact that they can't read or write would cause that much of a problem. It all depends on the person's attitude."

"For me it was quite difficult. It's a very powerful and painful story. In my case, I was not used to working because when my husband was alive, he was the one in charge of everything; he was the one in charge of the expenses—of everything. I was not used to working—just him. It was hard for me when he died, but necessity forces you to do things."

Indigenous woman leader

"I could not speak in public. I was submissive. I have experienced violence. I was a person who had very low self-esteem, then I overcame all of those setbacks to be able to get to where I am now."

"He didn't like me making decisions; no matter how small the decision was, I had to ask him—as if he owned me."

"My dad would tell us, 'You have responsibilities. You take care of your sister, you cook, you fetch water, you wash the clothes.' Everyone had their own responsibilities. That's how we were raised."

"You have to love what you do; you have to like it."

"Empowering ourselves, by valuing ourselves for who we are, in order to transmit that to others, to be able to inspire other women."



› Pucara community in Junin, a Quechua Indigenous woman grows vegetables. Photo by CAOI/CIAP for RRI.

“There are always limitations to women’s participation. In order to assume these roles, the doors close a little, and this happens in the Indigenous world, too. They recognize that women do good work, but they do not want to give them space to do it.”

“Where would I be if I didn’t know how to use a computer? Where would I be if I didn’t know how to write or do reports? Where would I be?”

“Every day, I am grateful to the universe for being alive. I always meditate. I always get up in the morning, I give myself strength every day. As they say, what’s missing in this area is self-esteem. First, we have to empower ourselves. We have to be okay with ourselves in order to transmit this message—this energy—to others.”

“But the men say, ‘A woman isn’t going to tell me what to do, women can’t tell me what to do!’”

“We are no longer the same shy women who used to be embarrassed to speak up.”

4. METHODOLOGY


Each of the three life stories was compiled by a different consultant who was on-site in the leaders’ countries—Peru for the Indigenous woman leader, Guatemala for the forest community woman leader, and Colombia for the Afro-descendant woman leader. Although all three consulting firms applied the life story methodology, each one took a unique approach when developing the stories.

In the case of the Indigenous leader’s life story, the consultant proposed and established dialogue as a key tool and created face-to-face and online spaces for these dialogues, as well as frequent conversations and coordination among story participants. The roles of researcher and interviewee were reformulated and redefined through dialogue and consciously fostered a more equitable environment where the story could unfold. Dialogue was promoted between the sociocultural and political contexts in which the protagonist has lived, thus using her voice to shape the narrative of her own story while navigating challenges, barriers, and strategies related to her leadership. The consultant implemented the following phases to prepare the life story: i) working together with the leader to outline the basic questions for the interview; ii) designing a data collection instrument; iii) conducting a series of interviews with the woman leader; and iv) systematizing the interviews and preparing the research report.

The consultant preparing the forest community leader’s life story started by using a process of reflection and dialogue. Through interactions between the interviewee and the researcher, a narrative about the leader’s life experiences took shape. The narrative was an opportunity to observe, identify, and analyze the relationships, actions, ideas, feelings, and contexts that have influenced and been influenced by the interviewee’s life. Throughout this process, it was the researcher’s task to analytically relate the woman leader’s life story with the surrounding social, cultural, political, and symbolic contexts, which in turn contributed

to the leader's transformation. The consultant paid particular attention to key events in the leader's life and her path to leadership in order to identify the moments where relevant changes or turn of events occurred. For example, by identifying the relationships and resources (political, cultural, community, religious, organizational, generational) she used or established to overcome obstacles, struggles, and limitations in her life and create redress mechanisms. There were three steps in the process of recording the life story: i) preparing the life story; ii) conducting interviews and informal conversations; and iii) analyzing results and writing the research report.

Finally, in the case of the Afro-descendant leader's life story, the consultant proposed capturing the life story as a way to understand social realities that often remain hidden. This process required active listening and respecting her language and the words she used. Alfredo Molano, a Colombian sociologist and journalist, emphasizes the significance of collective and popular language as a way of telling people's stories and capturing the unofficial history of a country at war. Popular language is the foundational element used in Molano's method—the starting point to build up the memory of a community or a people. Molano (2022) explains:



What is popular language? From a historical perspective, it serves as a foundational element in poetry. We must simply remember the romances, the minstrels, all those popular songs that transmitted situations that occurred or events that happened; they were delivered from one place to another through oral and popular language. In Europe, it gave rise to romance, to poetry. Popular language has close ties to literature—literature of great qualitative importance in deepening our understanding of the world. Without poetry, I would say, it is not possible to understand and comprehend a social reality. Poetry is originally orality, memory, historical memory, history.

In the process of building a life story, Molano argues that it is essential to belong to a territory, which he considers to be the essence of daily life. Territory is where one's identity develops and unfolds; where the seeds of individual and collective aspirations are found and the traces of each story inscribed in the bodies, the living or forgotten memory of the struggle to live or survive; where one has suffered and grown generation after generation.

The role that the Afro-descendant woman leader played in her family, community, and association was taken into account to understand the conditions in which she built her leadership, the strengths of her culture and environment, the challenges she faced, and the gender discrimination and exclusion that are part of her life story.

The steps involved in preparing her life story included: i) reviewing secondary information on the socio-cultural and gender dynamics of the territory the leader grew up on; ii) interviewing the leader about her life, including her childhood and family, and about how she positioned herself in her community to overcome the barriers of exclusion based on class, ethnicity, gender, and violence in order to become a leader in her community and organization at the national and international levels. The interviews were also a space to find out more about her difficulties and the strategies she used to manage and overcome them as an example for other women in the community; iii) transcribing the first interview with the leader;

iv) interviewing the leader a second time to delve deeper into issues that were either just touched upon or had gaps; and v) writing the report based on the leader's life story, following the criteria shared by RRI.

In all cases, situating the life stories both territorially and historically was important to understand how these contexts challenge, influence, and motivate women leaders. As such, the primary sources were complemented with secondary territorial, cultural, and historical information. People's life experiences are constructed in specific places that have been inhabited, conceptualized, and territorialized by local communities, Indigenous Peoples, and Afro-descendant Peoples, as well as by actors and institutions that dispute their control and resources of these territories. The territorial configurations emerging from these disputes form dynamic historical-geographical contexts that forge and transform identities and social actions. Therefore, women leaders' life stories and sociopolitical identities must be thought about from a perspective that takes into account territory and the multiple networks and relationships that shape it.

History is usually told through hegemonic voices that construct and impose a specific historical narrative onto people. In this sense, this study has been an opportunity to diversify the memories and representations of the historical narrative that has obscured the presence and agency of Indigenous, Afro-descendant, and local community women leaders.

Once the preliminary results were available, an information sharing and feedback session was held with 18 organizations from the RRI coalition in Latin America: Coordinating Committee of Women Territorial Leaders (CMLT), National Organization of Indigenous Women of Peru (ONAMIAP), National Coordinating Committee of Indigenous Women of Bolivia (CNAMIB), Association of Indigenous Women from the Brazilian Amazon (UMIAB), National Committee for the Coordination of Black Rural Quilombola Communities (CONAQ), Association of Afro-descendant Women from Northern Cauca (ASOM), Latin American Association for Alternative Development (ALDEA) of Ecuador, Fundación Azúcar of Afro-descendant women from Ecuador, Association of Forest Communities of Petén (ACOFOP) of Guatemala, Mexican Network of Forestry Peasant Organizations (RED MOCAF), the International Forum of Indigenous Women (FIMI), Association of Ipeti Embera Women Artisans of Panama (AMAIRE), Andean Coordinating Committee of Indigenous Organizations (CAOI), Black Communities' Process of Colombia (PCN), Organization of Indigenous Peoples of the Colombian Amazon (OPIAC), the National Agrarian Coordinator (CNA) of Peru, International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED), and CIFOR-ICRAF.

5. RESULTS

5.1 Barriers to leadership

5.1.1 Intersectional barriers

Understanding barriers means situating them alongside intersecting characteristics in the context of post-colonial societies and their territories. These histories have been shaped by patriarchal, racist, and classist violence, limiting women's right to organizational and political participation. Barriers also manifest in restricted opportunities for representation, hindering women's leadership and access to information. In cases where women are represented, these types of intersectional barriers can directly affect their participation in free and informed decision-making and impact the availability of safe spaces for managing their territories.

Each woman leader presented a particular context and a series of characteristics generally shared by other Indigenous, Afro-descendant, and local community women in Latin America. For example, within the forest community leader's territory, in Guatemala's Maya Biosphere Reserve, several actors with diverse

interests in controlling the territory are present. Among these are peasant and Indigenous populations who have recently migrated, international conservation organizations, large archaeological and tourism projects, oil companies, and organized criminal groups.

The Afro-descendant women leaders of the Colombian Pacific live in a territory plagued by historical tension due to the occupation, control, and exploitation of its water and resources such as gold and, in recent decades, illicit crops. Territorial disputes caused by illegal armed groups have had a profound and violent impact on the lives of Afro-Colombian women in Cauca as well as on the organizations working in the affected communities and territories.

Finally, the Indigenous leaders from the Peruvian Amazon live in a territory greatly impacted by the enslavement of IPs in the mid-twentieth century where the internal armed conflict profoundly impacted the Ashánika and Asháninka peoples' fight for survival. In all cases, states' neglect of rural peoples' basic needs have been a constant throughout history.



› Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, Colombia. Photo by Rafael Martinez for RRI.

5.1.2 Structural barriers

› Access to land and resources

There is constant tension between different legal and illegal groups regarding the control of existing resources in the territories where power relations between actors and gender stereotypes limit women's access to and control of territorial resources. This acts as a barrier to Indigenous, Afro-descendant, and local community women's organizational and political participation.

› Conflict in the territory

The ongoing conflicts in each of the territories have specific impacts on women leaders' life projects. At different times, these conflicts expose them to situations of displacement, uprooting, insecurity, intimidation, and re-adaptation, among other experiences leading to violations of their fundamental rights.

› Access to education

The lack of guarantees regarding access to and completion of formal educational processes for rural women are present in all territories assessed. This is a barrier that increases the gap in access to representative roles and positions due to both technical limitations and its impact on women's self-esteem.

› Access to technologies and technical know-how

In this set of barriers, access to and knowledge of technology, as well as increasing technical know-how, tends to privilege the men in the territories, limiting women's access. But above all it restricts the development of and decision-making around specific knowledge related to local issues, organizational management, and political advocacy.

› Economic insecurity

Taking these barriers into account, it is important to examine how they impact women leaders' level of economic security. Indigenous, Afro-descendant, and local community women leaders experience lack of job opportunities, wage inequality, and labor informality in their territories, thus strengthening the dynamics of economic dependence and the precariousness of their lived economies.

5.1.3 Gender roles and gaps

› Family

Household chores and caregiving responsibilities are often unpaid forms of work that contribute to the family economy. However, since these tasks fall mainly on women, it limits their availability to participate in trainings and organizational and recreational activities. This correlates with prioritizing men's education and favoring men for jobs and paid work in public spaces.

› Organization

These gender dynamics, which usually occur in the household, are often replicated in mixed-gender organizations where the value of women's contributions is reduced to care systems or agendas specifically related to women and the family. This subsequently reduces the access, eligibility, trust, and support needed for women to hold influential positions involving representation, negotiation, and other forms of leadership.



› Latin America Women Retreat. Tejiendo Juntas. April 2024.
Photo by ALDEA for RRI.

each family's socioeconomic status and/or family support. They also facilitated others' learning by involving young people in community work and training, supporting other women, and developing participatory methodologies for training and empowerment.

5.2 Women leaders' strategies to overcome barriers

5.2.1 Education

Women leaders expand their knowledge through university education and/or community and organizational work experience. In all the life stories, women leaders were consistently willing to learn and develop social and emotional skills in response to different situations, their relationships with others, and changes. When these women leaders are members of either Indigenous or Afro-descendant communities, they also rekindled and incorporated ancestral knowledge.

Among the women leaders, some focused on completing university and technical studies while others only completed primary school but decided to use their experience as a source of continuous learning. The opportunity for schooling was determined by

5.2.2 Grassroots community organizations

Organizations led by women employ a series of different strategies and share some common features. All the leaders interviewed are part of a community organization that was formed by forging relationships, seeking unity, and considering the most pressing needs in order to formulate programs and projects for the sustainable development of their communities, thus opening up possibilities to everyone.



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Some IP and ADP organizations are anchored in tradition and cultural solidarity practices. Those from local communities reinvent traditional peasant (*campesinas*) identities and practices in order to envision and interact with forests and their resources through the lens of sustainability. Some organizations incorporate and take part in the projects promoted by the state, influencing them from within and in coordination with peer organizations. Others are in critical opposition to the state (reporting corruption).

5.2.3 Agendas for strengthening the participation of Afro-descendant, Indigenous, and local community women

Women leaders join efforts to build agendas that strengthen their participation in decision-making, such as:

- › Instilling hope and loyalty in women; training women in individual and collective rights; supporting women to actively participate in organizations; and developing participatory methodologies to organize, train, and empower women to form associations and organizations.
- › Encouraging dedication, responsibility, and commitment to legitimize, generate credibility, and highlight women's leadership capabilities.
- › Promoting changes in organizations to create more spaces and specific moments for women's participation.
- › Diversifying the range of specialized roles for women within organizations.

5.2.4 Restoring support networks

- › The women leaders are associated with the international agenda for boosting women's participation.
- › They prioritize dialogue as a mechanism to address conflict and as a governance strategy.
- › They cultivate and maintain relationships with various national and international support organizations and related state-led institutions.
- › They forge and rely on family networks and each other to ensure their children's upbringing and their family's care and maintenance on a daily basis while also performing the demanding roles and responsibilities of a leader.

5.2.5 Personal growth

- › This refers to work and self-care through spiritual practices and emotional preparation, boosting self-confidence, having clear goals, being perseverant, and reconnecting with ancestors, life energies, and nature.

5.3 Differential leadership

5.3.1 The case of the leader of the Afro-descendant Peoples of Northern Cauca, Colombia

For ADPs, culture is fundamental for establishing community leadership. Due to the cultural identity and ancestral knowledge transmitted by elders about agriculture, culinary practices, caregiving, folklore, and natural resource use and care practices, the woman leader had a solid foundation upon which to raise her voice as a Black woman. She found ancestral strength in her ethnic identity that allowed her to positively influence other women and her community more broadly. Because of this strong cultural heritage, she understood the needs, shortcomings, and forms of exclusion suffered by poor and Black women in her community and learned how to connect with them through heartfelt words to develop strategies for unity, collaboration, organization, momentum, and support in implementing a collective process to defend territorial rights, the use of resources, gender equity, and political participation.

With community support, an association of Afro-descendant women was created, with this one woman's voice representing the common voice of many other women in the community. During this community process, women were empowered and the leader emerged as a representative and influential leader who participated in larger organizational networks and important national and international advocacy spaces.

The Afro-descendant woman leader gradually gained support from the male leaders in her family who helped pave the way for her within the mixed-gender organization where she had to fight to position herself as a leader and overcome challenges brought on by the macho, patriarchal culture and by experiencing violence in the territory on a daily basis. By respecting and recognizing their struggles, she earned the support of both men and women—particularly Afro-descendant women—from the communities. With this support, she worked to position women as agents of change in their communities and in the country.

5.3.2 The case of the Asháninka Indigenous leader from the Peruvian Amazon Rainforest

In general, IPs have managed to stay alive to this day based on their organizational, social, and political knowledge as well as through the transmission of cultural values, customs, knowledge of caregiving, territorial management, and the revitalization of languages, among others.

From this perspective, it is important to recognize how ethnic identity is fundamental to the Asháninka leader's participation and leadership process. She is part of the people, and the people are present in her participation. In addition to her identity and sense of belonging to the Asháninka people, it is important to understand that in current contexts, every Indigenous people assumes IPs' collective claim. Thus, the Asháninka leader's story, lessons learned, actions, and motivations stem from and are sustained by her ethnicity and commitment to taking on and building agendas that guarantee the access to and exercise of full rights for IPs at the national level.

However, her leadership and advocacy process has been guided by various coordination efforts, bringing together personal experiences, family contributions, and knowledge; both her grandmothers' knowledge and the leadership roles held by her father and mother have been essential. However, community, local, national, and international organizations, needs, and knowledge also played a key role in strengthening this process. For example, by sharing common reflections and encountering internal and external barriers along the way.

Just as ethnicity and organizational processes are part of this story, it is of utmost importance to consider that the experiences analyzed are those of an Amazonian Indigenous woman in mixed-gender organizational processes—in local, national, and international Indigenous organizations as well as in processes with intercultural and gender dynamics and misunderstandings in both organizational and external spaces.

This allows us to recognize how the barriers, strategies, and lessons learned identified are based on the experiences of an Asháninka Indigenous woman: a young, single mother with higher education; a translator and interpreter; and a woman who started the organizational process based on her family ties and her own experiences and concerns. She used her professional and technical knowledge to benefit the community and safeguard access to health for the country's IPs while also valuing and putting her technical knowledge at the service of the local organization.

The leader herself has recognized that factors such as time availability, economic autonomy, technical knowledge, and use of technology, translation skills, specialization in health issues, traditional knowledge, and socio-emotional skills are key in the participatory processes of mixed-gender organizations. Her rise to a leadership position happened quickly, moving from the local organization to international bodies such as COICA. She rapidly strengthened her capacities, skills, and knowledge of IPs' agendas at different levels and has used them to promote diversifying the types of positions that women can occupy in organizational processes.

It is also important to recognize how the same factors that legitimize the woman leader are also personal achievements that distance her—to a certain degree—from the situations experienced by the majority of Amazonian Indigenous women. On the other hand, it is important to recognize how, despite all these achievements, she has not been spared from experiencing harassment and gender-based violence.

Finally, the collective community process to defend the right to territory and the use of its resources—in which the communities' forestry organization was constituted and in which the leader emerged—has the following specific characteristics:

- › It is located in a recently populated (less than 50 years ago) area with peasant (*campesino*) families from different parts of the country; as such, different traditions, cultural traits, and ethnic groups are present. In other words, these long-standing social and cultural practices are not rooted in a territorial



› Latin America Women Retreat. Tejiendo Juntas. April 2024. Photo by ALDEA for RRI.

connection. Perhaps the main trait shared by the families that populated the territory is that of mobility in search of agricultural land since most of them are descendants from other internal migrants.

- › It is being carried out in a territory conceived by the state as a conservation area, which is part of the national system of protected areas created in 1989. Community access and participation in the collective management of the territory and its resources resulted from social organizing and negotiating with the state, but these terms are constantly being adjusted to meet the varying conditions and priorities of the conservation model. The urgency to comply with these conditions highlights opportunities for local leadership. In any case, the forestry concession and the implied relationship with the state is a very specific feature of this process.
- › Forest concessions, both internally and externally, are threatened processes. They are internally threatened because not all residents agree with the concession model and externally threatened because they are part of a territory formed by very unequal actors and groups in intense conflict with different interests and diverse arrangements. In the case of this forestry organization, the main threat comes from deforestation associated with illegal land sales to establish cattle ranches, even in areas where forest use is authorized.
- › Local leadership is strengthened to guarantee the continuity of the organization and the forestry concession granted by the state, which provides access to the territory. The effort to guarantee this continuity is—as the leader insists—a collective effort by a group women and men who have been part of the organization’s Board of Directors. She reiterates that she has a leadership role because of the association she represents and the assembly that appointed her. In turn, these entities support her when facing threatening social actors.

5.3.3 The case of the leader of the forest communities of the Mayan Jungle in Guatemala

The specificity of a mixed-gender community forestry organization located in a rural, peasant community has led to the establishment of a conventional gender hierarchy. The association is a source of livelihood for local families; therefore, it plays an integral role in the local population’s continued survival. In the households of a rural, peasant community, gender roles and corresponding divisions of labor follow conventional patterns. The leader notes: *“We are used to the husband going to work and the wife staying at home.”*

The gender-based division of labor in households intersects with the distribution of tasks and roles in the association’s forestry work. Men are in charge of the main tasks related to extraction, commercialization, surveillance, and control. They also occupy a higher percentage of management positions. Women participate in some phases of the extractive processes and carry out projects that are related to the conventional roles of women in the household economy (baking, cooking).

It is probable that the gender-based role differentiation in forest harvesting work leads to inequality in the acquisition of technical forestry and administrative knowledge, information, and work experience in organizational and advocacy spaces.

The two events that led to a turning point in her leadership trajectory were: i) becoming the head of household and breadwinner after her husband’s death; and ii) her appointment as president and representative of the association after male community leaders resigned from the association’s leadership positions. This happened at a time when being at the head of the association constituted a risk due to

tensions and threats resulting from territorial disputes and the state’s intervention in that conflict. In both moments, an “external” event disrupted the conventional and predominant distribution of gender roles in the household and community spaces. These events promoted the creation of spaces where tenacity, commitment, and a willingness to learn allowed her not only to forge her leadership role, but also to safeguard the organization’s concessionary process.

The association—formed with the help of ACOFOP and international cooperation—constituted a new experience for the local people. Almost from the beginning, ACOFOP raised the importance of women’s participation, facilitated training on gender equity, and founded a specific organizational network for women. Participating in this network has been a learning and empowering experience for many women leaders.

It is important to work with the women—and men—who are part of the concessions and encourage them to question the limitations imposed on women by the conventional and predominant distribution of gender roles in the household and in rural community spaces and to demand more opportunities for women. These are processes that can be promoted without “betraying” or “dividing” the forest concession’s collective objectives.

Based on the forest community leader’s experience, it is important to show other women the learning and employment opportunities that are available to them as a result of their participation. It can be argued that the gender subjectivities of organized women, such as the woman leader, are solidified in the interaction between a conventional household and community gender structure and the new experiences and perspectives that result from participating in women’s organizational networks and training processes at different levels.

6. LESSONS LEARNED

Lessons learned and commonalities of the three women leaders derived from the strategies developed to exercise their leadership and pave the way for other women in their communities:

- › Enable women to empower themselves as leaders and fight for their rights and those of their communities, prepare themselves for opportunities, and recognize their skills and abilities to take on leadership positions.
- › Promote more and new leadership, both in terms of replacement, but also in terms of inter-learning involving young people in community work to prepare them for leadership positions.
- › Identify and sustain support networks, including support for women’s initiatives and



› Latin America Women Retreat. Tejiendo Juntas. April 2024. Photo by ALDEA for RRI.

community processes to form associations, and promote the support of international and national NGOs.

- › Participate in technical training to overcome the gaps in education and specialize in technical knowledge. Promote access to basic, secondary, and higher education.
- › Increase awareness of self-care and self-defense to deal with the violence and demands they are subjected to.
- › Promote a safe family environment that promotes self-esteem and knowledge of individual and collective women's rights.
- › Gain collective or community support so that more women leaders can emerge and be the voice of many.
- › Promote the strength that comes from being part of an organization. Women are empowered through participation in broader organizational networks and through their participation in advocacy spaces. As one woman leader articulated: *"These spaces help us learn more, including what's involved with certain positions, and important issues are discussed, such as political advocacy."*
- › Support women's initiatives and community processes to form associations.
- › Forge the ability to be able to speak and be heard. As one person shared: *"We are no longer the same shy women who used to be embarrassed to speak up."* Dialogue should be used as a strategy alongside managing needs and advocacy).
- › Develop collective actions that address the basic needs of women and the community with participatory methodologies using assertive language and action without harm.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STRENGTHENING WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP

Comprehensively support women's empowerment with differential approaches according to sociopolitical and cultural contexts:

- › Visibility
 - Identify and raise awareness of exemplary Amazonian and Andean women at the local, national, and international levels.
 - Raise awareness of community organizations' successes and achievements to no longer confine women to the household setting and offer a starting point to create more spaces for reevaluation, empowerment, and reflection.
- › Training
 - Support the formation of new leaders, creating places for young women and men to train for leadership positions.
 - Strengthen spaces for reflection and exchange of intercultural experiences among women.

- Design more “learning by doing” opportunities, especially in second-tier organizations and/or regional and national organizations. One way to achieve this would be to establish more internship opportunities.
 - Promote opportunities, spaces, and events for self-education and for women to share their feelings and emotions.
 - Train more women in self-care and self-defense.
 - Increase training and technical skills for women such as becoming a political spokesperson or attending international conventions. Recommend learning opportunities in statistical interpretation and national-level regulatory frameworks.
 - Train more women in the use of various communications technologies.
 - Improve training processes and establish spaces for the exchange of experiences to record and safeguard Indigenous women’s ancestral knowledge.
 - Approach the perspectives of community feminism developed by Mayan and Indigenous women to reconstruct common misconceptions and reflect and address inequality in gender relations and the conditions of women in community structures. This should be done in the context of redesigning training on gender issues.
- › Organizational strengthening
- Support women’s struggle as agents of change and decision makers.
 - Strengthen and revitalize women’s specific and shared agendas.
 - Promote spaces to recover memories, histories, and important milestones of the Indigenous Peoples’ movement and revitalize agendas according to current contexts.
 - Incorporate Indigenous women in negotiations and proposal/project creation.
 - Create spaces for dialogue, reflection, and training on women’s participation as an empowerment mechanism vis-à-vis male-dominated spaces.
 - Develop strategies to address, support, and de-stigmatize motherhood as a constraint to women’s participation.
 - Safeguard and require quotas for women’s participation in organizations and participatory bodies.
 - Identify collective needs and specificities to promote women’s participation.
- › Advocate for the support of other actors
- Strengthen the coalition’s organizational leadership by supporting its work and action plans, and the coordination and exchange of peer organizations’ experiences.
 - Seek international support to strengthen and protect women’s social organizations.
 - Lobby in different decision-making scenarios.

- Strengthen advocacy and negotiation processes with the state at different levels.
 - Think about and facilitate mechanisms and spaces for dialogue to have discussions with the state and environmental NGOs about the consequences for local governance and the vulnerability of the population’s territorial control.
 - Address the impacts of gender-based violence, racism, and ableism¹ on women’s participation.
 - Improve the participatory construction of protocols to report and address cases of gender-based violence.
- › Leadership
- Find the human value in themselves and in others.
 - Draw from the needs of the communities to strengthen their struggles.
 - Start over strong when all seems lost.
 - Never forget the community that allowed the person to emerge as a leader.

NOTE

1. Ableism: Understood as the hegemonic establishment that validates people in terms of the development and achievements related to their intellectual and physical capacities, overvaluing academic knowledge and achievements as opposed to situated knowledge based on people’s experience.

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