

**THE PANDEMIC, A
GLOBAL CRISIS, AND
STRENGTHENING THE VOICES
OF WOMEN AND YOUTH**

INVESTIGATION REPORT

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PREFACE

Our time is marked by the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, which shined a light— together with the current global crisis—on the systematic and structural inequities that have disproportionately affected indigenous and Afro-descendant peoples. Although it is true that we have confronted pandemics throughout human history, this last one underscores the lack of preparation on the part of states to confront them. Observing historical accounts, indigenous peoples “move forward while simultaneously looking backward,” to avoid repeating errors, despite all of the oppression they experience. Silently and cautiously, they have guarded long accumulated ancestral knowledge and know-how.

Climate change and greenhouse gases are the manifestations of an anthropogenic era that is endangering the planet’s environmental stability, with an increase in hurricanes, flooding and droughts that resist mitigation. The effects on indigenous and Afro-descendant women are devastating. Nonetheless, these women continue to generate innovative and essential proposals for confronting the civilizing, western mold.

In a time of global crisis, it is important to know and document the way leadership works based on the perspectives and tempo/pace of indigenous and Afro-descendant women. They organized themselves to defend their individual and collective rights in different spaces—international, regional and local—where dialogue and negotiations took place, to improve their existence and ways of life in their territories. In the short term, we have seen the emergence of new actors, ways of working, and adaptation. In this context, indigenous and Afro-descendant peoples (PIAs) continue confronting significant inequality and equity gaps. Therefore, governments must take measures that favor those most affected by such inequalities, assuring that responses to COVID-19 guarantee the comprehensive protection of all peoples nationwide.

Most governments in the Global South did not know how to cope in this context. Their attempts to keep health care services from collapsing and people from infecting each other were not very effective. Lockdown strategies were employed in most countries, which has led to a serious deterioration of the international, national and local economic systems, and negative impacts in social and political arenas, where indigenous peoples have suffered the greatest effects. Thus, this health crisis has added to the pending debts of governments with PIAs, who have historically suffered from subjugation, ethnocide, human rights violations and whose social leaders have been and are being attacked, threatened and murdered.

The following recommendations to the Colombian Government, made prior to the pandemic by Aída Quilcué Vivas, leader of the Nasa indigenous people and advisor to the National Indigenous Organization of Colombia (ONIC) on the rights of indigenous peoples, human rights and peace, remain valid and are pertinent to other States: “First, there must be compliance with the Constitution. Second, coordination between the special indigenous jurisdictions and ordinary jurisdictions needs to be strengthened, because we have our own jurisdiction that is constitutional... Third, effective outcomes stemming from research—in both the national and international frameworks—need to be implemented, and need to be made public... We still have not obtained results related to the material and intellectual authors of assassinations, forced relocations, detentions, and all of the victimizing acts that indigenous people have suffered. As long as we do not have these, there will be no justice. Hopefully these recommendations will be met, so we can have peace and justice (Indepaz, 2018).

On June 1, 2020, the Afro-Descendant Institute on Research and Regional Development, the Costa Rican Caribbean Project Association, the Association of Afro-Colombian Women, AMUAFROC, and the Xango Group from Argentina called on governments to ratify the Inter-American Convention Against Racism, Racial

Discrimination and Related Forms of Intolerance. They warned, "COVID-19 has worsened and made clear that our societies have racist stereotypes and archetypes injected into their blood, leading to great social and economic disadvantages and disparities that have enormous impact on our communities."

There is an urgent need to more deeply explore the female contribution to maintaining social cohesion and nurturing a sense of the future in their own spaces and times, linked to family, community, and cultural education and reproduction, as well as the generation of income as domestic employees and other productive activities outside of the family context, in urban locations.

This essay covers some of the spaces where indigenous and Afro-descendant women have been present during the COVID-19 pandemic, organizing experiences related to the female contribution to social cohesion in the regional framework of the pandemic. They have recovered knowledge and good practices related to leadership, participation, and organizing from family and community spaces, and from ancestral knowledge.

More specifically, we identify the obstacles to women's full participation in formulating alternatives, recognizing their skills and knowledge, and sharing their experiences in processes of community adaptation and resilience.

Through virtual conversations, we learn about the reality of women's organizations of PIAs, partners, allies, participants and donors of the Ford Foundation's BUILD program (Building Institutions and Networks) in Central and South America and Asia. We do not seek to burden them, but rather accompany them, listen to them, to support their efforts, their energy and strength, to ensure the continuity of their legacy and understand how they discover alternatives in totally adverse circumstances. The primary information found on the web pages of their organizations was analyzed, along with information from secondary sources, to understand more clearly how indigenous and Afro-descendant women have adapted to change and rallied resilience and leadership in the face of crises.

In the following sections, we examine the pandemic's impact on indigenous and Afro-descendant women, and their forms of organization and participation in communities and territories. Some recommendations from the organizations and movements are summarized, highlighting their capabilities and strengths used to confront the social-health crisis, and finally some conclusions are shared.

IMPACTS OF THE PANDEMIC ON INDIGENOUS AND AFRO-DESCENDANT WOMEN

The pandemic caused very specific impacts in the lives of women, and has deepened existing gender disparities in the spheres of individual and collective life. The most similar emergencies from the past are perhaps the armed conflicts, genocide/ethnocide, and natural disasters, but none were as unpredictable as the current pandemic.

We examined the mechanisms and instruments used to manage key aspects of the emergency by indigenous and Afro-descendant women, in the context of their community collectives and/or civil society. The goal was to find theoretical perspectives while different, offer more just and inclusive solutions for PIAs, and gender equality, which would allow the status quo that existed prior to the pandemic to be changed.

The measures taken to impede infections globally consisted of confinement and quarantine, aimed at protecting the public health system and avoiding the collapse of health care services. However, this approach is not neutral from an indigenous or gender perspective. Special or specific measures to confront the impact of the pandemic among the most vulnerable social sectors have not been adopted. Nor has the fact that critical situations have arisen in rural areas where indigenous communities are located—with the highest incidence among indigenous women—has been considered. Thus, although they are the most affected in the health sphere, due to the absence of conditions that would prevent infection, they also suffer the worst socioeconomic consequences due to lockdown. These include the job insecurity that prevails in the regions, where 86% of indigenous people around the world work in the “informal” economy with low salaries and no social protection (ILO, 2020a, p. 2).

Homes have become the space where everything happens: the care and education of children and adolescents, socializing, and productive work. As well as family violence. The work of caretaking and attending to family members, which should be collective, has increased. Indicators show an increase in gender-based violence and violence against children due to lockdowns, and to women’s limited access to public services that prevent and respond to violence, which are not considered essential. Even though the majority of governments are currently adapting measures in the emergency context, some more extraordinary measures are needed. At one year since the pandemic began in Brazil, more than 400,000 have died, with the highest daily deaths averaging around 3,900 per day.

COVID-19 has revealed historical, structural inequalities that place women among the highest risk groups, and PIA women even more due to the conditions they live in. For many organizations, the pandemic had a determinant and operational impact. Since many PIA communities are virtually abandoned and because health systems are precarious, women experience many obstacles to accessing sexual and reproductive health services, such as hospital births, which could mean increased maternal mortality. Faced with the emergency, national governments do not adequately manage the situation. It also appears that poverty and unemployment will continue to increase.



The Center for Studies on Labor Relations and Inequalities (known by CEERT in Portuguese) of Brazil has demonstrated the inability of some governments to respond to the disease: "In Brazil, we now have more than 160,000 deaths, but it is important to note the under-reporting of cases. Moreover, some groups are more affected, such as the black and indigenous populations. CEERT is prioritizing network actions, together with other Afro-descendant organizations, to denounce the government's actions and push the Judicial and Legislative powers to act, ensuring compliance with the law. We are already experiencing the dismantling of public policies, especially in the area of health care, where racism, inequality and food insecurity have intensified."

In Colombia, the ONIC provides statistical data about the implications of COVID-19 among the indigenous peoples of this nation: "At this moment, or through the end of October 2020, we have 72 indigenous groups affected by the pandemic. More than 33,000 cases of COVID-19 among our indigenous population, and 1,177 deaths due to the pandemic."

In Guatemala, the pandemic has affected the work of community-based organizations, directly impacting their operations and ways of organizing. Udiel Miranda, of the Peace and Ecology Commission (COPAE), states: "COPAE, and the Mayan People in general, believe that the pandemic's impact on the organization has been both negative and positive... A positive aspect is that the pandemic forced us to promote a political project in partnership with the CPO (Consejo del Pueblo Maya before Consejo de Pueblos de Occidente), which has to do with the right to self-determination of indigenous peoples in

Guatemala and a Multi-National State, as a response to finding ways to harmonize and guarantee the exercise of collective rights in Guatemala."

The Continental Liaison of Indigenous Women of the Americas (ECMIA), via Norma Don Juan, affirms:

"The pandemic has affected us a lot. We are a network of organizations from the entire continent, and operate more face-to-face. For us, it is important to share the word. Now, being in these virtual spaces, it is a different format, and there are fewer spaces. It has been hard for us to work in these forms of virtual participation. Here, we realize how difficult it is, and we are aware of the technological gap that this pandemic has created."

SOME OF THE CONSEQUENCES OF COVID-19:

- An increase in violence, discrimination and racism.
- A loss of spaces where spirituality, culture, and the inter-generational transmission of knowledge take place.
- An increase in women's workloads, due to taking care of the family and other tasks.
- Effects on mental health.
- Limited access to precarious health care services.
- A lack of food, and impact on productive systems, commercialization, and employment.
- The closure of schools, more school dropouts, and limited access to technology.
- Extractive projects have affected indigenous territories.
- An increase in the vulnerability of non-contacted indigenous peoples.
- A highly vulnerable situation affecting indigenous leaders who are defenders of the territories.

Although the virus can infect anyone without discrimination, many communities are at greater risk of infection and have fewer resources for protection in societies as unequal as those of the global South. These communities are located in isolated rural zones, lacking infrastructure and access to services. Others are in peri-urban areas without access to safe water for washing hands (one of the main measures for preventing the spread of the virus), or for following bio-security measures. Given these difficulties, indigenous and Afro-descendant women continue working, changing their behavior in order to protect the most vulnerable groups, developing their leadership skills, and positioning themselves in their territories.

HOW WE ARE ORGANIZING AND PARTICIPATING IN OUR COMMUNITIES AND TERRITORIES IN THE CONTEXT OF COVID-19

We have seen women's organizational skills and resilience in both family and public spheres. Indigenous and Afro-descendant women have historically organized in different settings. In the family, they are caretakers and protectors, while in the communities they are spiritual leaders who govern within the communities, preserving and revitalizing their language, culture, and ancestral knowledge. Their spheres of organizational influence converge, from self-managing food to conserving the environment.

Through contact with more than 30 indigenous organizations, of women and mixed composition, in 23 countries of Latin America, the Continental Liaison of Indigenous Women (ECMIA by its Spanish name), collected reports issued by governments and the organizations themselves, to clarify the situation of indigenous women in the region. The result is the Regional Report: INDIGENOUS WOMEN OF THE AMERICAS FACING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC (May, 2020), which contains 15 recommendations for ensuring the full participation of indigenous women. It stresses the urgency of supporting initiatives of indigenous women and youth, the importance of disaggregating data, publicizing measures for preventing infection in indigenous languages, and designing protocols for caring for the indigenous population.



In a similar exercise, the National Network of Human Rights Defenders in Honduras circulated the Garifuna medicinal guide to combat COVID-19, which was produced by the Fraternal Organization of Black Honduran Women (OFRANEH by its Spanish name) to share plant-based medicinal recipes that are useful in alleviating symptoms caused by COVID-19.

The Garifuna, Black and Quilombola Organizations (Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador and Honduras) reached common agreements about the crisis generated by the COVID-19 pandemic via videoconference in April 2020. In these, they recognized the precarious situation of health care systems, and their joint concerns about access to food in the PIA communities. They reaffirmed the importance of having an active, strategic agenda for promoting protection, for systematizing their actions, and for basing their practices on ancestral knowledge from the communities through medical networks created by indigenous peoples. They also highlighted the importance to defend and retain their territories through joint work, in solidarity with other organizations.



One such experience is that of CHIRAPAQ, which works in partnership with indigenous youth to demand sexual and reproductive education, along with the corresponding health care services, to help avoid pregnancy and maternity among indigenous girls and teenagers in the context of COVID-19. This same organization is collaborating with indigenous populations in Cantagallo through delivering water and masks, which helps people protect themselves against the virus.

The organizations of indigenous and Afro-descendant women took strong measures to confront the challenges and threats posed by the pandemic, and used different organizational approaches linked to their ancestral systems of governance. They adopted a model of community assembly that operates as a democratic decision-making space in the community. Through this mechanism, the assembly proposes a board of representatives, which forms part of the general assembly. In addition, administrative and security boards are proposed. Transparent work and accountability are fundamental elements for generating an atmosphere of trust that allows the definition of joint objectives.

FOOD SECURITY AND SOVEREIGNTY



In some countries, strategies have been adopted to guarantee the indigenous population's access to food, but with some limitations with respect to coverage. Moreover, these do not usually include traditional indigenous products (CEPAL, 2020). Given this situation, the organized indigenous peoples have adopted and deployed cooperative and reciprocal strategies.

Many communities established a barter system for products and oversight of communal markets, to control speculation and shortages of products. They also promoted the return to community economies including food security and sovereignty through creating family gardens, promoting basic grain production, and setting up seed banks.



The Coconut Breaker Women of Babasú (MIQCB, Brazil) and the Alliance of Indigenous Peoples of the Archipelago (AMAN) promoted food security through delivering food kits to heads of families. Sandra Regina states: "We changed our activities and spoke with our donors, and got in touch with other donors to make basic food baskets, because after 60 days, 90 days, we found that we had many relatives who needed food... We obtained resources for

the basic food baskets and basic hygiene baskets, since not all of the families in rural zones have masks, alcohol and gel. We activated the state governments and also the federal government. During the pandemic, cases of violence against women and agrarian conflicts have risen."



AMAN has a program promoting indigenous food sovereignty, using a sustainable approach. Annas Radin Syarif explained how this effort is being sustained:

"First, the indigenous economy as a national force, based on the spirit of God and our mutual cooperation, reciprocity and justice which has survived in this crisis. Second, we are strengthening food sovereignty among indigenous peoples, as a key pillar of national food sovereignty, including the preservation and promotion of local foods, and strengthening the production of indigenous foods, which includes indigenous knowledge and technological innovation in indigenous territories. Third, we also promote greater community resilience. We build mechanisms of resilience in indigenous communities to confront crises like the recent COVID-19 pandemic, and other future crises."

There are many similar experiences, planned and implemented by indigenous organizations, which have gone unnoticed, especially by governments. For example, the Chachi and Tsáchila nationalities in Ecuador have created mechanisms for bartering products with other indigenous peoples. In Peru, the Paru Para, Chayuyaire, Amaru and Pampallacta communities provided food to people who were on lockdown in Cusco. In Costa Rica, the "indigenous virtual bartering system" has been created, for equitably exchanging products and resources, and some Mapuche communities in Chile donated 6,000 kilos of food for community kitchens in the city of Temuco (CEPAL, 2020).

DEFENDING THE TERRITORIES



The invasions of indigenous territories have continued during the pandemic. In fact, some argue that these have increased, taking advantage of the crisis. The loss of territorial control due to increased threats from settlers, mining companies, logging companies and drug traffickers has increased the risk of infection, limiting possibilities to develop autonomous strategies for responding to the pandemic. This has occurred in a number of indigenous regions, despite the design of “health boundaries” prohibiting access of third parties to the communities, or protocols for circulating and isolating, as measures to contain and mitigate COVID-19, all of them based on the right to self-determination, such measures of protection have not been respected. Moreover, such interventions have been endorsed by governments, arguing national priorities (CEPAL, 2020).



The Coordinator of Indigenous Organizations of the Brazilian Amazon (COIAB, by its Portuguese name) proposes an organizational model focused on defending their territories against invasions by settlers and the extraction of their natural resources. Nilcélio Jiahui, a representative of COIAB, states: “The pandemic has been accompanied by many invasions of indigenous lands. With all of this, we are getting through the COVID-19 pandemic, and we are resisting. We want to take part in meetings to strengthen our territories and the rights of indigenous peoples.”

The governments of Latin America give less priority to protecting indigenous territories, and give greater importance to other agendas. Given this reality, indigenous leaders in Brazil raised their voices to defend their territories through a social network campaign called #MinersOutCovidOut, aimed at stopping the invasions of Yanomami territories by illegal miners, who are the main vectors of COVID-19 infection and other diseases such as malaria. At the 45th session of the UN’s Council on Human Rights (CDH), Brazilian Mauricio Ye ´ kwana, director of the Hutukara Yanomami Association and spokesman of the above-mentioned campaign, warned about the growing devastation and contamination of the environment: “Our territory has been invaded by more than 20,000 illegal gold miners who bring diseases such as malaria, as well as alcohol, drugs and violence, to our communities. Moreover, they contaminate our rivers with mercury. In 2020, “Garimpeiros”- illegal gold miners, murdered two Yanomamis.

In the midst of the pandemic, the miners also brought COVID-19, infecting the communities that live near the mining zones. As leaders, we have been demanding that the Brazilian government remove the illegal miners, but the government has not responded adequately to this problem. To the contrary, in public statements, government officials have encouraged the illegal extraction of gold from indigenous lands in the Amazon, and this intensifies the threats against us. We continue to see the forest destroyed. This is why I come here, once again, to denounce the negligence of the Brazilian government. We ask for support from the international community, so that our rights will be respected.”

SPIRITUALITY



Indigenous communities preserve and revitalize their spiritual values, and each one has different forms of practicing and living them. Through these practices, they have been able to confront, understand, and live with the pandemic. Spirituality is a transcendental value for the communities, families and individuals. The ECMIA proposes undertaking training processes to raise awareness in the context of COVID-19. Norma Don Juan explains: "This pandemic has forced us to modify some of the ways we exercise spirituality. Contact with the territory, with nature, and with the communities is important to us. But we also know that we need to strengthen spirituality in these complicated times we are living through."

The social-health crisis has been addressed at the biological and physical levels. However, the indigenous conception of health and disease is that these are also related to social and spiritual factors. Understanding the pandemic from the indigenous viewpoint requires a more comprehensive approach (ECMIA, 2020).

Providing care, according to indigenous spirituality: The Native Women's Association of Canada has an emergency phone line through which wise women provide spiritual counseling and emotional support. In addition, they provide information about preventing infection from COVID-19, and promote self-care strategies through their social networks. In the Innu community of Uashat, sacred fires are lit every four days with the goal of strengthening energy.

In Colombia, the role of spiritual caretaking is assumed by the elders, who carry out rituals. Similarly, in Chile, the Mapuche "machis" are conducting emergency ceremonies to ask the spirits for strength in confronting the pandemic.

PREVENTING VIOLENCE, SEXUAL ABUSE, AND THE TRAFFICKING OF CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

Women and girls of indigenous origin live in situations of extreme vulnerability, since aspects of life such as sex, racialization, disabilities and territorial inequalities fall most heavily on them, leading to exclusion, exploitation and marginalization, and even more so when considering factors caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. In this situation, other abuses of human rights increase, stemming from structural social violence linked to gender and ethnic identities. This translates into exclusion from social protection services as well as attention, justice, and dignified sources of employment (CEPAL, 2020).

Organizations of indigenous and Afro-descendant women promote strategies to prevent violence in different territories of Latin America, fighting sexual abuse and the trafficking of minors and adolescents. Partner organizations of ECMIA indicate that the presence of the army and police, in both urban and rural zones, exposes them to other forms of state-sponsored violence. Thus, mechanisms are needed that prevent, investigate, punish and clarify acts of structural violence exercised by state and non-state agents against the indigenous population, and that stop the criminalization of defenders of indigenous territories.

Another central issue during the pandemic has been reporting cases of sexual abuse against girls, adolescents and women. The ECMIA has played a proactive role, confronting these situations and energetically denouncing them. Aida Quilcué Vivas, Human Rights Advisor of the ONIC and a member of ECMIA, indicated: "This is not an isolated topic. It is structural. It is a doctrine of the Public Forces that must be dismantled in order to usher in peace in Colombia, and to eliminate the xenophobic way of seeing things in this country."

INDIGENOUS PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES AND LIVING IN URBAN AREAS

COVID-19 threatens all people. However, indigenous people with disabilities—with chronic conditions or weak immunological systems, or those with reduced mobility—confront greater inequalities in access to medical care during the pandemic. They have less access to information and health care facilities, and selective medical directives and protocols can increase discrimination and limit their access to health services (OHCHR, 2020). Many of them cannot maintain social distance, and they lack the help and supplies that they need.

In addition, in the peri-urban zones of many cities, there are large groups of indigenous and Afro-descendant people who have migrated to the cities due to the loss of their lands, displacement, militarization, or worsened livelihoods in their communities. They have limited access to health care services, water, and housing, and many families depend upon mothers who work in the informal sector. This group is vulnerable, and lacks the means for adequately confronting COVID-19. With only their ability to work, many return to their communities seeking protection and support for confronting COVID-19, but with the danger of bringing the infection along with them. This situation reflects another way that the rights of indigenous peoples are violated.

EDUCATION AND ACCESS TO TELECOMMUNICATIONS



There are gaps in access to telecommunications in both peri-urban and rural communities, which have scarce or no access to the Internet. This is due to the high cost, or distance. During the pandemic, thousands of young people and children have been relegated to virtual education. Access to Information and Communications Technology (TICs) poses a challenge for many indigenous and Afro-descendant women. Although they may “have access” to technology, it is often at a more “formal” level, since the existing power relations keep large groups of the population excluded from such access. Benefits such as telemedicine and virtual education are something beyond their reach.

The indigenous women of the Tacana and Sirionó peoples of Bolivia have undertaken an advocacy effort. They question the policy of utilizing virtual education during the pandemic. Liliana Velasco, from Tacana’s Original Community Land (TCO), indicated that they feel discriminated against, since classes are beginning under unsuitable conditions. There are no computers, cell phones, and in some places the Internet signal is weak. Similarly, Esmeralda Ribera stated: “They are discriminating against indigenous peoples. We are being left out of education... It costs a lot and not everyone has a computer or cell phone. The truth is, there are two or three families that have these, but the problem is for the other families... How are we going to manage virtual education if we don’t even have enough money for the family’s food? The Sirionó people have tried, and we are certain that to deal with this coronavirus... we have an elected government, and we must demand education from it, and demand that there is medicine in the health posts, and medical personnel.”

At the Afro-LASA virtual meeting held on May 14, 2020, two Afro-Costa Rican sisters, Epsy and Shirley Campbell Barr, noted that the pandemic had further weakened many of those who were already vulnerable, and that racial inequalities have been ever present during these days. Recounting in “key of biography”, they categorically and courageously affirmed their black identity. They feel they have benefitted from public education, and argue that within structurally racist systems, inclusive education is vital. It is necessary, they recommended, to define specific guidelines for attending to the Afro-descendant population, through activism and leadership, seeking gender equality to confront existing gaps and vulnerability.

Many leaders learned how to use cell phones and to communicate through voice messages or other applications. Young women see a need to learn to better manage technology, and to develop messages and videos that document the living situation in PIA communities, as part of political advocacy with municipal, regional and national authorities.

RECOGNIZING OUR ABILITIES AND STRENGTHS



OFRANEH

Women's participation is a fundamental part of recovery during crises. This is the time to recognize the support that the organizations of indigenous and Afro-descendant women provide to creating solidarity both within their communities and beyond them; to ensure the protection of their territories and their cultural heritage; and to expand spheres of participation and decision-making. COVID-19 has demonstrated that women have the strength and leadership skills needed to transform and effectively

solve social and economic problems. Women respond to the pandemic in the different spheres where they live and participate.

Their worldview and leadership in conserving biodiversity contributes to re-thinking aspects of our society. Their ancestral knowledge helps to build more sustainable, robust and resilient agro-food systems. The role of women is key to guaranteeing the planet's food sovereignty and security, preserving seeds and using techniques that promote higher quality food production.

Their strategies are geared toward preventing infection, protecting families and communities, and helping to generate the conditions for individual and collective survival—physical, mental and spiritual. Some of the strategies that indigenous and Afro-descendant women have shared are presented here:

- Applying responsible standards of governance, and the use of ancestral communal knowledge.
- Increased awareness, training, education and communication about COVID-19 in indigenous languages.
- Adopting measures to deal with food insecurity, and creating conditions that can be sustained in the crisis.
- Prioritizing the eradication of violence and conflict resolution during the pandemic.
- Promoting government responses to the crisis facing indigenous communities.
- Building organizational capacities, coordinating, and forming partnerships with other sectors.
- Guaranteeing safe environments during crisis situations, at family and community levels, with special emphasis on protecting children.

The United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women promotes measures that governments should adopt to defend the rights of women while responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, and for their recovery post-crisis. Their directive emphasizes that plans should promote the economic empowerment of women, and address gender inequities in employment and in social protection systems. The president of the Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women stated: "We salute the leadership that many women have shown during the present crisis, ensuring effective measures to protect their populations. After the pandemic, the Committee would hope to hear more voices of women in the reconstruction of economies and societies."

SHARING OUR PRACTICES AND EXPERIENCES

Building strategies

The National Organization of Andean and Amazonian Indigenous Women of Peru is developing an action platform based on three key strategies: 1) National and regional advocacy, to create direct and multi-sector dialogue between the Government and indigenous organizations, with the aim of implementing specific measures to prevent and contain the COVID-19 health emergency among indigenous peoples; 2) Document the situation of local grassroots organizations in the context of the state of emergency, and how communities are confronting this challenge; and 3) Make advocacy work more visible.

Developing enterprises

Indigenous artisans and women in various countries of the region have shifted their work toward producing masks that prevent infection from COVID-19. Women from the Yalve Sanga indigenous community of Boquerón, Paraguay are producing masks that are purchased by the Punto Farma pharmacy chain, thereby contributing to their economic sustainability. In Mexico and Peru, indigenous women are producing masks using natural elements such as palm leaves. In Panama, Guna women make masks with the traditional “mola” technique, and Garifunas in Honduras are making masks for their communities.

Improving communication

Women’s organizations have developed new practices that allow them to continue operating. Yovani Alvarado of the Utz´ Che´ Community Forestry Association of Guatemala explains: “The pandemic allowed us to explore virtual communication and training. It also motivated distance work. Now we combine face-to-face work with virtual modalities. It also helped us to develop more fluid communication between the regions, without the physical barrier of distance. We also have better quality dialogue, to collectively develop proposals and create networks between organizations and peoples.”

Innovative ways of raising awareness among indigenous women

The ECMIA of Mexico notes that the pandemic has led to the development of new methodologies and dynamics. Norma Don Juan explains that to organize workshops, they have had to find, learn and create practices that strengthen spirituality without having contact with their territories, nature, or the communities.

In Peru, indigenous women’s organizations have demanded intercultural attention in cases of violence against indigenous women and children. Indigenous women in the region indicate that governments do not utilize mechanisms for identifying the ethnicity of women who have been victims of gender-based violence.

Comprehensive health

In its 2020 report on COVID-19, FILAC indicated that Latin America will have a much higher rate of infection than global rates, with impacts on health. Moreover, the socioeconomic situation will worsen due to immunological conditions, the prior existence of epidemics in some zones, and a notorious lack of health care services. Consequently, a good part of the indigenous communities will find themselves highly vulnerable to COVID-19 (FILAC, 2020).

Despite this, native Colombian communities are confronting the pandemic and slowing its spread using traditional methods. Yidid Ramos, a Kankuama indigenous woman from Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, is responsible for the ONIC's traditional inter-cultural medicine component. She receives all of the recommendations, advice and knowledge from the "elder women" ("mayoras" or traditional doctors) of the country, and shares this with indigenous communities to combat the disease.

"Our health is integral," Yidid Ramos told the Anadolu Agency... The first action is territorial control... only those people who really need to, should enter or leave the communities. Second, adds Yidid, "there is ancestral knowledge. That is where everything begins. First there is the spiritual harmonization of the sacred sites in all of the indigenous communities throughout the entire country, where Mother Earth is asked permission to deal with the virus and so we will heal." There is a third aspect, related to the use of our own plants and food autonomy and sovereignty, when an imbalance is created in the body. "The bitter plants are used for the rituals, and the sweet plants for baths and harmonization," explains Ramos. There is a fourth area related to traditional medical treatments, linked inter-culturally with allopathic medicine: ... there are specific plants and medicines for each stage of a disease, with their corresponding measures... "Here, the measure is preventive isolation at home, but since there are no separate rooms in our communities, a "maloka" or separate site needs to be available, and then food can be brought there."

PIAs have a holistic worldview. Therefore, there is a direct linkage between health, spirituality and knowledge. So, when we speak about health, we refer to the entire natural environment made up of humans and non-humans. The focus being used by indigenous and Afro-descendant women promotes the learning and sharing of knowledge, and training among peers. For example, for developing biosecurity products, health-care products for women, and self-care experiences.

Advocacy actions demanding the rule of law

Grassroots community organizations carry out advocacy work denouncing acts that violate human rights. The Utz Che' Community Forestry Association of Guatemala in collaboration with other Guatemalan organizations wrote an open letter demanding free and universal access to potable water by the entire Guatemalan population, and the allocation of financial resources to comply with the human right to water and sanitation during the pandemic. Another initiative led by this same organization was a letter about the COVID-19 situation, and the Guatemalan government's failure to respond to the pandemic.

SOME CONCLUSIONS

The criminalization that existed prior to the pandemic continues. The pandemic is leaving us a world without the knowledge of our elders who have left us. Leadership is beginning to emerge and grow, without our elders. In the international context, some sectors have questioned the basic consensus about women's rights that was reached more than 25 years ago, such as the Convention to Eliminate All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Fourth International Conference on Women, held in Beijing, and the Inter-American Conference on the Prevention, Punishment, and Eradication of Violence against Women (Belém do Pará Convention). International and regional organizations such as the Organization of American States (OAS), as well as its Member States, must strengthen the gender focus in their analyses and decisions, their spaces for defending and attending to the rights of women such as the OAS's Inter-American Commission of Women (CIM), the National Advancement Mechanisms, and must ensure the equal participation of women in government cabinets responding to the crisis. Disregarding a gender approach will deepen inequalities, generating on-going, long-term effects that will be difficult to reverse. Therefore, the equal participation of women in decision-making, and the adoption of a gender approach, should be central elements in the mitigation and recovery policies that respond to the health crisis.

The spread of the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed historical, structural inequalities experienced by indigenous and Afro-descendant women, situating them among the highest risk groups due to the conditions they live in. The pandemic has also shown the multiple roles women have historically assumed, and more specifically those they have assumed during the crisis.

Climate Crisis and COVID-19 are global crises, and impact on all aspects of social and economic life. During the pandemic, young women have emerged as leaders who are resolving problems with a more comprehensive approach. Actions that link this emerging leadership in the movements and the organizations of indigenous and Afro-descendant women are being catalyzed. Linking experiences has been a problem at the regional level. Nonetheless, this can be overcome by the leadership of women who work collectively, with ethics, in unison with inter-generational knowledge.

Learning to manage TICs can help democratize access to information and knowledge, as long as adequate resources, infrastructure and equipment are available.

We stress that in rural areas, Internet coverage is still precarious, and access is very costly. Available equipment often does not satisfy objectives, since often no one knows how to operate it. Equipment is not well maintained, and depreciates over time. Thus, this represents a challenge to projects that are trying to increase access to TICs. They must also consider the importance of training, and the use of intercultural and gender approaches in managing platforms and programs if they wish to include indigenous and Afro-descendant women (girls and young women). On the other hand, indigenous leaders must promote the development of software and encrypted information mechanisms, to protect the physical integrity of those defending the territories.

Women's movements and organizations have joined together in exercising and demanding their rights, in denouncing increases in violence, discrimination and racism, and the absence and/or inefficiency of governments. Given such an adverse context, women have reformulated their actions and have organized, depending on the level or degree of specialization, defining the roles they play at each organizational level.

A context marked by COVID-19 brings us to conclude that there is a strongly felt need to guarantee the full exercise of rights, and above all a need to provide quality food, safe water, culturally pertinent health care, and adequate access to information and Internet infrastructure, to strengthen educational processes in indigenous and Afro-descendant communities. It has also been observed that the devastating effects of the pandemic could have been prevented to some extent if governments had responded with more suitable and inclusive leadership and structures, as part of the global response to the crisis.

Indigenous and Afro-descendant women organized and participating in mixed organizations, where decisions made by men predominate, will continue seeking spaces where they exert influence and participate. They will seek organizational mechanisms and collective empowerment through meetings where they can share experiences, proposals, reflections, and knowledge with their equals on social platforms.

The role of PIA women is of fundamental importance. When they are adequately trained, they can confront high-risk situations. Thus the pandemic, which exacerbated the existing social-health crisis, demonstrated the social inequality faced by excluded sectors, and unleashed a state of uncertainty. It provided an opportunity for indigenous and Afro-descendant women leaders, together with young people, to demonstrate their strength and the primordial role they play in finding more dignified and inclusive solutions in the midst of the crisis.

For years, the power relations existing within development cooperation have created an asymmetrical relationship. The new context demands that PIA organizations work in a more reciprocal manner with their partners and receive more direct support and more resources, to obtain more sustainable impacts on their standard of living. Thus, processes aimed at building institutional and organizational capacities play a key role in constructing resilience and new horizons for indigenous and Afro-descendant women.

The women of PIA organizations—members, partners, participants or donors to the BUILD Program—affirm that they are not beneficiaries of the donors, but rather partners. Their contribution is a holistic view, their spirituality and ethics, working to harmonize, link and exercise women's governance and leadership.

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