



POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF INDIGENOUS WOMEN IN ECUADOR: FROM THE CITIZEN'S REVOLUTION TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

*PARTICIPAÇÃO POLÍTICA DE MULHERES INDÍGENAS NO EQUADOR: DA
REVOLUÇÃO CIDADÃ À PANDEMIA DE COVID-19*

*LA PARTICIPACIÓN POLÍTICA DE MUJERES INDÍGENAS EN ECUADOR: DE
LA REVOLUCIÓN CIUDADANA A LA PANDEMIA DE COVID-19*

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Abstract: This study aims to trace a historical path of participation of indigenous women in Ecuador between 2008 to 2020, a period that includes the establishment of the new Ecuadorian Constitution (2008), the October uprising (2019), and the crisis of the Covid-19 (2020-present). To analyze the role of activism led by indigenous Ecuadorian women in these important moments, we carried out a detailed review of the existing bibliography and used information available in the media, especially in Ecuadorian newspapers. Thus, we were able to observe how they organized themselves against the obstacles of sex, race, and class accentuated in moments of extreme crisis.

Keywords: indigenous women; activism; Ecuador; politics; resistance.

Resumo: Este trabalho tem como objetivo traçar um percurso histórico de participação das mulheres indígenas no Equador entre os anos 2008 a 2020, período que compreende a criação da nova Constituição equatoriana (2008), o levantamento de outubro (2019) e a crise da pandemia de COVID-19 (2020 - presente). Para analisar qual o papel do ativismo de mulheres indígenas equatorianas nesses momentos importantes para o

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país, fizemos uma revisão detalhada da bibliografia já existente, bem como utilizamos informações disponíveis em meios de comunicação, especialmente em jornais nacionais. Assim, pudemos observar como elas se organizaram frente aos obstáculos de sexo, raça e classe acentuados em momentos extremos como os de crise.

Palavras-chave: mulheres indígenas; ativismo; Equador; política; resistência.

Resumen: Este trabajo tiene como objetivo trazar un camino histórico de participación de las mujeres indígenas en el Ecuador entre los años 2008 al 2020, período que comprende la creación de la nueva Constitución ecuatoriana (2008), la encuesta de octubre (2019) y la crisis de la pandemia del COVID -19 (2020 - presente). Para analizar el papel del activismo de las mujeres indígenas ecuatorianas en estos momentos tan importantes para el país, realizamos una revisión detallada de la bibliografía existente, así como de la información disponible en los medios de comunicación, especialmente en los diarios de circulación nacional. Así, pudimos observar cómo se organizaron frente a los obstáculos de sexo, raza y clase acentuados en momentos extremos de crisis.

Palabras clave: mujeres indígenas; activismo; Ecuador; política; resistencia.

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1 Introduction

“Si muero, muero, pero otros han de venir para seguir, para continuar”

(Dolores Cacuango)

Affectionately called by the nickname Mamá Doloreyuki, Dolores Cacuango² was an Ecuadorian indigenous activist who marked the history of her country for her arduous commitment to the struggle for indigenous rights. Considered a national heroine, she participated in the establishment of the Ecuadorian Indian Federation (FEI) and left an important legacy of

² Born on October 26, 1881, in Cayambe, Ecuador, Dolores Cacuango died in 1971 at the age of 89.

resistance against historical processes of domination for indigenous women. Like so many others, Dolores was part of a vast group of female indigenous leaders engaged in events that profoundly transformed³ Ecuador. In the 21st century, indigenous women continue the legacy of Cacuango and those who came before her and are one of the central elements in the maintenance of contemporary democracies.

The marginalization of indigenous women in Latin America resulted from an extended colonization process. Since the arrival of colonizers in overseas territories in 1492, indigenous women have been stigmatized and made invisible by a narrative that has placed them as subordinate subjects (MICHELETTO, 2021) to European customs. Therefore, they became liable to different types of violence, especially those related to race, gender, and class. As a result of colonialism, the value of each life throughout Latin American history acquired a different weight, which varied according to the hierarchy imposed by the processes of domination and genocide (BERLANGA GAYÓN, 2014). That said, indigenous women are the ones whose lives had – and, in some ways, still have – the least value.

Having been removed from their positions of power during colonization, indigenous women were subjected to gender roles forcibly imported from Europe. According to Paredes and Guzmán (2014), although patriarchal relations existed before the beginning of Latin American colonization, the colonizers ended up establishing their own patriarchy and phallogentric machismo. Added to the original patriarchy, both complemented and refined their ways of oppressing women (p. 82).

In Latin America, indigenous women are more susceptible to poverty, violence and being the most impacted by large-scale development projects (such as extractivism), since their bodies, families, homes,

³ For Mantel and Vera (2014), the functions performed by indigenous women caused and still have a great impact on the lives of their communities – which ends up being reflected, in a way, in the public sphere. Despite the indigenous cosmivision notably recognizing the roles of women in the domestic sphere, it is possible to observe a process that they define as “a staggering conquest of power” by these women in the political field. According to the authors, examples such as Sarayaku v. Ecuador, which culminated in the victory of the Kichwa people in the Inter-American Court of Human Rights in 2012 against the Ecuadorian government and its extractive policies; and that of Doña Julia, a protagonist in the Tundayme case against the Chinese mining company Ecuacorriente, which refused to leave her home despite pressure from the company, demonstrate a convinced participation of indigenous women in the defense of their territories and their peoples (2014, p. 4).

environments, and economies are directly affected (VITERI, 2017) by them. In the case of Ecuador, they have the highest rates of illiteracy (26.7%), income poverty (49.3%), gender violence (67.8%), and the highest unpaid workload (55.8%), according to data from the 2022 National Institute of Statistics and Census⁴, published by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). Therefore, they are not only part of, but are one of the main groups of excluded people, victims of neoliberal and neocolonial institutions and practices that strengthen the unequal socioeconomic, cultural, and political structure in which they are inserted in (NIEVES-LOJA, 2021).

Although they face the double stigma of being women and indigenous and often belonging to the poorest sectors of society, they combat some of the worst inequalities in the region (GATEHOUSE, 2019). Indigenous women claim their right to cultural differences and, at the same time, claim the right to change the traditions that oppress and exclude them (HERNÁNDEZ CASTILLO, 2001). Such women are thus part of an ancestral claiming force, which takes on a new form through different tools. This is what Cadena (2019) calls "emerging indigeneity": the insurrection of indigenous forces and practices capable of deeply breaching the dominant political formations and rearranging hegemonic antagonisms, especially when the exclusion of indigenous practices from nation-state institutions is legitimized and, consequently, naturalized (CADENA, 2019).

However, female Indigenous activists have to expend twice as much energy as their male counterparts to be elected to positions of power in organizations and to maintain their relationships with institutions or political groups that are generally male-dominated. The *Estudio Violencia Política Contra las Mujeres en Ecuador* (2019) shows that Ecuadorian women, in general, are still underrepresented in political positions with low participation in the political sphere also being considered a form of

⁴ Retrieved from: <https://www.unicef.org/ecuador/dise%C3%B1o-de-un-proyecto-para-el-abordaje-de-problemas-que-viven-las-mujeres-y-las-ni%C3%B1as-ind%C3%ADgenas> . Accessed on: 10 Sep. 2022.

violence. On the other hand, when – and if – elected, they become vulnerable to physical and moral harassment resulting from political gender violence. As indigenous women in the political scene, they become exposed to jokes and rumors that question not only their femininity but also how they build their womanhood, take care of their children, and how they expose themselves in public.

For that reason, the presence of indigenous women in the political arena has made the configuration of ethnic and gender identities in the current context of the indigenous movement more complex. In this process, they restructure the strategies of political representation and seek to dialogue with the different segments to make their demands viable in a field of interests different from those of non-indigenous people. Between 1990 and 2008, the Ecuadorian indigenous movement also managed to re-signify the Ecuadorian nation. This was possible because it achieved a stable articulation of the indigenous sectors and managed to project itself into the demands of other sectors against the neoliberal reforms that were taking place. This allowed them to move from a sectoral struggle centered on indigenous claims to a national struggle defining a nation project synthesized in the Ecuadorian Plurinational State (CRUZ RODRÍGUEZ, 2012).

Hence, this article aims to analyze the political participation of indigenous women in three important moments in Ecuador: the so-called Citizen's Revolution, with the establishment of the new Constitution of 2008; the 2019 indigenous uprising, strongly marked by the indigenous female presence; and the fight against the Covid-19 pandemic crisis, in 2020, when the presence of indigenous women on the front line was central in the indigenous peoples' claiming.

2 Indigenous Women in the Citizen's Revolution

In a thesis entitled *Uniendo y abriendo caminos: La actoría política de las mujeres indígenas en el movimiento indígena ecuatoriano*⁵ Méndez Torres (2009) examines the participation of these women in the history of Ecuadorian politics. According to the author, a long and constant process of struggle was necessary for indigenous women to be considered citizens with their demands being considered. Thus, starting from a condition of inequality, it became essential to demand rights inside and outside indigenous organizations, as a first step towards being seen as political subjects and, therefore, having their own voice.

Since the 1970s, the Latin American indigenous movement has directed its collective actions based on socioeconomic and political-legal objectives in a scenario marked by the crisis of the rule of law and the transformation of neoliberal geopolitics. In this context, indigenous women's leadership assumed a strategic role in occupying positions and consolidating an agenda that considers their needs and particularities (PÉREZ CÁRDENAS, 2018). During this claiming process, the indigenous women's movement developed organizational, discursive, and programmatic capabilities, which allowed them the power of requiring, for the peoples they represent, demands of recognition and redistribution.

In 1990, the indigenous uprising was the forerunner of profound changes in the Ecuadorian state (CUESTA ORMAZA, 2016). The Ecuadorian Indigenous Movement (MIE), organized in the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE), was characterized mainly by the struggle against neoliberalism. The defense actions of the indigenous nationalities were not of identity, but of defense against the threat of economic restructuring policies that expanded the frontiers of exploration

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Retrieved from: <https://lac.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Field%20Office%20Americas/Documentos/Publicaciones/2019/12/VIOLENCIA%20POLITICA%20Baja.pdf>. Accessed on: 10 sept. 2022.

of minerals and hydrocarbons in their regions. According to Escárzaga Nicté (2004), neoliberal adjustment policies affected the most vulnerable sectors of society in Latin America; however, indigenous peoples felt less of the effects of such policies due to their relative independence from the international market and high degree of productive and cultural autonomy. That being the case, they occupy a somewhat propitious position to face attacks from neoliberalism. Furthermore, “the indigenous population has its own ancestral culture that provides them with cohesion and self-organization mechanisms, life projects and secularly applied resistance and struggle strategies” (ESCÁRZAGA NICTÉ, 2004, p. 104, our translation).

Such articulation was the result of an incessant search for dignity that permeates the history of indigenous peoples. In other words, this political organization and the consequent indigenous uprising for the right to land and recognition of their territories, for the strengthening of their identity and languages, allowed Ecuador to recognize the cultural diversity of indigenous nationalities (CUESTA ORMAZA, 2016, p. 36) in the 1998 Constitution. Nevertheless, although the performance of indigenous women was decisive throughout this insurrection, their participation “in organizational construction is notoriously invisible or barely visible” (PALACIOS, 2005, p. 312, our translation).

The city of Montecristi, located 400 km from Quito, Ecuador, was the setting chosen by Correa to host the Constituent Assembly in 2007. For eight months, various sectors of society contributed to the establishment of a democratic and inclusive document. During this period, indigenous women had the opportunity to advocate for their rights and put agendas that took gender and ethnicity issues into account, thus reconciling new and old debates.

In her work *Vernacular Sovereignties*, Manuela Picq (2018) explores how the work of a small group of 100 Kichwa women from Chimborazo was central to advancing the conquest of indigenous women's rights in the 2008 Ecuadorian Constitution, and how the dynamics of these women supported the different forms of governing that are found outside the

modern state. That happens because, once movements become institutionalized, women are pushed aside, forcing them to fight two simultaneous battles: one within their own culture and the other against the dominant state culture. In other words, these women are doubly oppressed by intergroup sexism and machismo in both structures, as their leadership practices take place within a dominant national culture, which is still largely patriarchal, Eurocentric, racist, and exploitative.

In the Latin American scenario, globalization and the neoliberal economic model have the power to exert the labor of overexploitation of women, as well as to sponsor gender policies that capture the voices of denunciations of such women in the face of oppression, according to Julieta Paredes (2010). It is, for Paredes, a relationship between the capitalist system and patriarchy that forces women to remain obedient to the traditional gender roles imposed on them. According to the author, it is first necessary to deneoliberalize gender to then decolonize it, including the indigenous and popular machismo that legitimizes the power of men over women and that has existed since pre-colonial societies (PAREDES, 2010, p. 73).

Autonomous indigenous forces question the sovereignty of states and their male peers, thus contributing to their experiences as an oppressed and forgotten class. Even when organized outside of traditional politics, they managed to include their requests in official decision-making spaces. According to Picq (2018), Ecuadorian indigenous women were able to add several articles to the 2008 Constitution to ensure greater participation of women in all decisions related to the exercise of collective rights. They also transformed the international legal system to gain autonomy within their nation-states and, on the other hand, confronted the prejudices that sought to confine them to strictly local knowledge. The author reinforces, however, that although this was the first time in the world that a justice system respected the gender parity norm, the achievement is, nonetheless, made invisible by racism and dominant machismo.

As in other Latin American countries, indigenous women in Ecuador were victims of massacres, dispossession, torture, and femicide as part of policies that resulted either in assimilation or extermination (PÉREZ CÁRDENAS, 2018). In this context, what is now called the “decolonial turn”⁶, a movement that proposes greater recognition of indigenous causes, became unimaginable. That said,

This discursive and political change could not be understood without the broad mobilizations and political actions of peoples and communities, in such a way that, in the process of struggle, indigenous peoples were constituted as political actors, with their agenda, from which they question normative frameworks and economic and public policies aimed at them. (PÉREZ CÁRDENAS, 2018, p. 62, our translation).

Indigenous female leaders still face many challenges in the public and private spheres. They are, firstly, discriminated against for being native and of mestizo culture. At the same time, they are susceptible to problems specific to the condition of being indigenous, such as the pressure suffered by the State to sell their lands and abandon their territories in favor of extractive policies, they are victims of threats and physical aggression. In this scenario, they also experience human rights violations related to being indigenous women, such as forced sterilizations and access to inadequate health services, including sexual health.

The division of reproductive labor meant that Ecuadorian indigenous women were relegated to private spaces, as they were considered to naturally belong there (GÓMEZ PERALTA, 2005). The role that indigenous women in Ecuador played was – and still is, essentially – that of mother and wife: they are responsible for taking care of the home and family, and also have limited space in the community. Their actions need to be screened by their husbands beforehand. According to Herrera Acosta et al., Aboriginal

⁶ The decolonial turn, from the perspective of Castro-Gómez and Grosfoguel (2007), is an opening to knowledge and its different forms; it is a search for freedom of thought outside of European and/or American standards. It is, therefore, to free oneself from other-theories, other-policies, other-economies, and to detach oneself from the Eurocentric rhetoric of modernity. Besides that, what de(s)colonial thinking highlights is the modernity/coloniality/decoloniality dialectic. That said, one does not exist without the other. Since the colonial-imperial invasion of 1492, which inaugurated the globalization of capitalism and modernity, we have observed the praxis of resistance and re-existence of subalterns. In this work, we use de(s)coloniality as a theoretical corpus in institutional spaces, to highlight the agency of marginalized subjects.

women are in a lower hierarchy, being subordinated to men's customs and decisions. In some indigenous worldviews, they are the ones in charge both at home and in the community (HERRERA ACOSTA *et al.*, 2021, p. 18).

In the study *Violencia de género contra mujeres indígenas del área rural del Cantón Teña* (2021), Tayupanda Cuvi *et al.* share testimonies of indigenous women about domestic violence suffered in the rural area of *Cantón Teña*, in the Ecuadorian Amazon. For the authors, it is important to point out that two of the five provinces with the highest percentages of violence against women throughout life belong to this region – Morona Santiago, with 78.9%, and Napo, with 77.7%. Some of the common factors in these women's testimonies is that, in addition to being fully aware of the violence suffered, they were seen as property by their partners.

“As I told you, men are very jealous, especially because they are older and others are high school students, and they believe they are worth more because we women do not study for that”. (Alpha, interview with the author on September 9, 2021). [...] Beta replies: “Yes, because men are very jealous and beat their wives and children. They drink and after drinking, they beat them” (Beta, interview with the author on September 10, 2021). [...] Delta responds: “Yes, here in the Amazon there is a lot of machismo. Men consider that they own us and that is why they beat and hurt us” (Delta, interview with the author on September 10, 2021). (TAYUPANDA CUVI *et al.*, 2021, p. 67, our translation).

Besides domestic violence, they also suffer from a lack of economic opportunities, since their main forms of livelihood are agriculture and livestock, which, according to Jaramillo Jaramillo and Canchigña Galarraga (2021), generates low wages. Radcliffe (2014) points out that most indigenous women in Latin America are somehow related to rural and agricultural models of life. Considering this, a factor that also highlights gender inequalities is the barrier encountered by indigenous women in gaining access to agricultural credit, which is essential in the production of food and goods (2014, p. 19). In the political field, the presence of indigenous women is still limited: according to the Ecuadorian Committee for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the participation in the public and political life of female leaders originating in

electoral processes and local politicians is insufficient⁷. In the Ecuadorian National Assembly, with 137 members, only 52 are women, for example⁸.

The Provincial Network of Indigenous Women's Organizations of Chimborazo (Red de Mujeres Kichwa de Chimborazo), founded more than two decades ago and shaped by people such as Cristina Cucuri, managed, in the Constituent Assembly, to propose institutional strategies to improve the lives of Kichwa women of Chimborazo and go against the systemic exclusion of such women in the political sphere.

Before, we, through the Provincial Network of Indigenous Women's Organizations, held various workshops, events, marches, and mobilizations. We dealt with what the Constituent Assembly means, and its statutes, to see if we also voted yes or no. We also carried out the proposals of the Kichwa women up to the Constituent Assembly, and participated in the Women's Pre-Constitution, when the National Council of Women (CONAMU)⁹ held an event in Riobamba. (CUCURI, 2009, p. 134, our translation).

Through meetings with other women in the province, they articulated to point out collective structural violence of which they were victims and what they aspire for themselves, according to Cucuri (2009). Then, using the Provincial Network, they gave workshops in Riobamba, in which the theme of justice for women was the most recurrent demand. Such women did not trust the conventional justice system, as it remained too sexist. By unsuccessfully presenting their grievances to representatives in charge of public policy planning and also to other women's organizations, Kichwa women realized that their voices counted little for local government or social movements and that they would need to depend on themselves (PICQ, 2018).

Kichwa women had two goals. First, they sought to incorporate women's international rights into indigenous forms of government. They wanted the same access to rights as non-indigenous women. [...] Second, they hoped to gain political relevance in their communities and asked the indigenous movement to value

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Retrieved from: <https://www.igualdadgenero.gob.ec/wp-content/uploads/downloads/2021/01/PARTICIPACION-DE-LAS-MUJERES-EN-EL-ECUADOR.pdf>. Accessed on: 10 sept. 2022.

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Retrieved from: <https://www.eluniverso.com/noticias/politica/unas-52-mujeres-resultaron-electas-para-la-asamblea-nacional-segun-estimaciones-nota/>. Accessed on: 27 nov. 2022.

⁹ Ecuadorian National Women's Council is responsible for developing and promoting actions to protect and promote women's rights.

women as they valued water and territory. It was an ambitious project. (PICQ, 2018, p. 132, our translation).

Hence, indigenous women “exposed specific problems that they experience as women within their peoples, highlighting the scarce opportunities they have to access decision-making spaces” (PÉREZ CÁRDENAS, 2018, p. 63, our translation). Consequently, non-white women – who, according to Lugones (2008), are victims of the coloniality of power and gender¹⁰ – sought to insert themselves in decision-making processes at local and national levels, taking into account the particularities related to the intersection between race, class, and gender. They needed, above all, to become politically radical: now it was about transforming the current model of economic development into one that respected the right to life (FEDERICI; VALIO, 2020).

In 2008, the new Ecuadorian constitution declared Ecuador a unitary, multinational state. Compared to the 1998 Constitution, resulting from the 1990 indigenous insurrection, “the new Magna Carta of 2008 declares that Ecuador is a plurinational and intercultural State, that is, that it recognizes and validates indigenous claims” (LALANDER; OSPINA PERALTA, 2012, p. 16, our translation). The dogmatic part mentions indigenous nationalities, and integrates various aspects of the indigenous worldview, such as “buen vivir”. The text formalizes the Kichwa and Shuar ancestral languages, as well as Spanish and other languages of the indigenous peoples in the areas where they live while declaring the promotion of intercultural education and recognizing nationality as part of the Ecuadorian State.

The Constitution began to recognize the collective rights of municipalities, communities, and cities, such as maintaining ownership of ancestral lands and territories and obtaining their free adjudication and participating in the use, management, and conservation of natural

¹⁰ When Lugones talks about gender coloniality in her writings, she includes women seen as white in Latin America and non-white in the great power centers – US and Europe (based on her experience as an Argentine white woman who migrates to the US and suffered from racism). We know, from an intersectional perspective, that although there is no hierarchy of oppression, the way in which white Latin American women experience gender coloniality is different from black and indigenous women.

resources on their lands. Furthermore, indigenous peoples must be consulted on the exploitation of their territories (RODRÍGUEZ, 2012). More importantly, of the 494 articles in the 2008 Ecuadorian Constitution, 3 included the participation of indigenous women, an achievement unimaginable until then. Along the way, the small group of rural indigenous women became protagonists in a new approach of doing politics. Since then, a transformative form of democracy has been put into practice.

Boaventura de Sousa Santos, in his work *Refundación del Estado en América Latina Perspectivas desde una epistemología del Sur* (2010), discusses how postcolonial feminism, in which indigenous women play a decisive role, distances itself from the critical and Eurocentric tradition, to give the State in a deeper anti-capitalist and decolonizing sense. The contributions of indigenous women – and even Afro-descendants – have, for the author, the merit of decontextualizing their discrimination as an ethnic minority. Not only that, but postcolonial feminism also demonstrates that there is no single, universal way to achieve gender equality; for indigenous women, in the context of complementarity present in their cosmovisions, this would be possible without necessarily giving up their identities and practices. It is, above all, a process of re-signifying central hierarchical concepts in their way of *being indigenous*.

The resignification would result, in Boaventura's perspective, in the reterritorialization of the feminist struggle, due to its centrality in the fight for land and territories in the engagement for identity and against discrimination. This feminist struggle, however, will not be easy political work for women. This happens especially in societies in which the ways of covering up subordination, since everyone is considered a brother or sister, is more subtle and difficult to eliminate; the solution, then, would be to find an “alternative to transform one’s own culture without despising it or replacing it with another and therefore contribute to enriching the political-cultural heritage of the global feminist struggle until now

dominated by Eurocentric and liberal conceptions” (SOUSA SANTOS, 2010, p. 107, our translation).

Gargallo (2014), finally, advocates that the activism of indigenous women made them leave marginalized communities and victims of a real *apartheid*, to become an alternative representation to the universalism of the nation-state. Their presence in protests on the streets, roads, or towns and their interference in places of republican politics end up, somehow, awakening solidarity in other indigenous peoples. By manifesting themselves, they can ratify “their historical, rooted and politically proactive presence in politics that had been hijacked by the white and mixed-race population, which they believed to be the totality of citizenship, if not 'legitimate citizenship' of independent republics” (2014, p. 32, our translation).

3 2019 uprising

In the most emblematic photo (**Figure 1**) of the 2019 demonstrations in Ecuador, an indigenous woman from the province of Cotopaxi, dressed in a colorful *bayeta* and wearing a white mask, is at the center of a somewhat chaotic scene. In the background, a cloud of tear gas scares away people trying to go in the opposite direction. Such people also try to protect themselves, using a kind of makeshift face mask out of T-shirts. The moment, captured by David Días Arcos, was October 9, the national day against the austerity measures of the then president, Lenín Moreno (2017-2021). That same day, the neoliberal package (also known as the economic *paquetazo*) – which eliminated subsidies for gasoline and diesel, and which would directly impact the lives of the indigenous population by increasing the cost of public transport and necessities – had been approved¹¹. The social and political mobilizations, motivated by economic interests at

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<https://www.telesurty.net/news/gobierno-ecuador-medidas-economicas-lenin-moreno-20191002-0002.html>.

. Accessed on: 10 sept. 2022.

stake, corroborated its intersectional character. Indigenous Ecuadorian women, once again, participated heavily in the protests.

Figure 1 – Indigenous woman in the midst of protests in Ecuador



Source: David Días Arcos/Bloomberg, 2019.

The conjuncture in which the demonstrations took place was one of great indignation on the part of social movements and other sectors. After all, the signing of Executive Decree No. 833, by former President Lenín Moreno (Alianza PAIS), in which economic, tax, and labor measures were adopted, would affect the most fragile layers of society. In October, the mobilizations demonstrated the power of organized civil society to demand more inclusive public policies and social rights (RÍOS RIVERA; UMPIERREZ DE REGUERO; VALLEJO ROBALINO, 2020). Led by indigenous people, they were one of the most important social movements in contemporary Ecuador, exposing an institutional crisis that forced President Lenín Moreno to accept the demand to revoke the decree. The indigenous and popular uprising, therefore, managed to unite the indigenous movement, trade unions, transport federations, students, teachers, and women to take to the streets to protest. Its leading role showed a “remarkable recomposition as it appeared in increasing numbers on the march to Quito” (BONILLA; MANCERO, 2020 p. 275, our translation).

The reform proposed by Moreno stated that more jobs would be generated and that young people and women, the most affected by

unemployment, would be the main beneficiaries. The government was in line with the austerity plan of the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The president, arguing that he inherited a bankrupt and indebted state, while supported by the business community, distanced himself from the progressivism that elected him to assume a neoliberal agenda that, until that moment, had been contained (TORRES DÁVILA, 2020).

The first category to paralyze activities and organize mobilization to block decree 833 was transport. They demanded that the subsidy not be withdrawn, because otherwise, the ticket price would rise. The request, according to Rea (2020), attracted the indigenous movement, which joined the transporters to peacefully march to Quito. However, what began peacefully turned into one of the most violent and complex events in contemporary Ecuadorian history (IZURIETA, 2020). Indigenous women, who participated massively in the demonstrations, were also victims of intense police repression.

Thousands of citizens joined the movement when they realized the verticality of the implemented measures. For Luque, Poveda Moreno and Hernández Zubizarreta (2020), other political forces and social agents were not consulted by the government. "Thus, the situation resulted in processes of intransigence on the part of the State by not giving in to the withdrawal of the decree's measures [...], omitting its consubstantial dialogue on their application and scope" (p. 20, our translation). In response, the government allowed actions of force and violence called precautionary measures in the service of peace. In the 11 days of demonstrations, dozens of people were arrested and 11 were killed, in places where the presence of indigenous peoples was a majority or where there is a presence of indigenous migrants:

Within the multiple actions that the government carried out to stop popular demonstrations, Decree N° 884 was established, declaring a state of exception for 60 days throughout Ecuadorian territory, arguing circumstances of serious commotion and alteration of public order, in addition, to suspend the rights of assembly and association. The Constitutional Court endorsed this decision, even though it reduced the measure to 30 days. Later, on October 8, it issued Decree N° 888, transferring the seat of government to the

coastal city of Guayaquil, where the indigenous movement has a smaller presence. (LUQUE; POVEDA MORENO; HERNÁNDEZ ZUBIZARRETA, 2020, p. 19, our translation).

At the same time, barricades and bonfires appeared in popular neighborhoods north and south of the city. Airport operations were suspended in the metropolitan district, while large demonstrations dissipated in Ecuador's largest cities. Highways were blocked, while social discontent against government measures, as well as the excessive use of force against indigenous resistance, became widespread (TORRES DÁVILA, 2020).

The indigenous women, led by CONAIE, were at the forefront of the conflict, standing out for their participation and mobilization. Indigenous women representing 14 nationalities, from the mountains and plains of the Ecuadorian Amazon, joined the march. It is estimated that between October 6th and 9th, more than twenty thousand indigenous people entered Quito, a city that had become the scene of the bloody social revolt (TORRES DÁVILA, 2020, p. 228). Indigenous action, according to Ugsha Ilaquiche, had

[...] the ability to contextualize and encompass the discourses of broad social sectors throughout Ecuador, constituting one of the most important in the last two decades similar to the 1990s. (UGSHA ILAQUICHE, 2021, p. 56, our translation).

As soon as they arrived, indigenous women marched through the streets of Quito demanding an end to the economic package. What is striking is that many of them carried their children on their backs, wrapped in traditional indigenous clothing. In an interview given to BBC¹², they explain that, in the indigenous cosmovision, having the family in the struggle is part of a community resistance, which also includes the political formation of future generations. It also is a part of indigenous education since their struggle is pedagogic and capable of teaching. After all,

¹² The fragments of the interview summarized in the following lines were published by Matías Zibell under the title *Crisis en Ecuador: ¿qué hay detrás de la foto más emblemática de las protestas indígenas? (y por qué las mujeres son clave en este movimiento)* on BBC News Mundo Ecuador, on 14 oct. 2019. Retrieved from: <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-50040317>. Accessed on: 20 Jan. 2022.

participating in protests as a family is a consequence of their sense of community, according to Adriana Rodríguez, one of the interviewees. “Why do [indigenous women] come with their children? Because it is a community resistance, so they come with the mother, grandfather, grandmother, everyone comes” (our translation). Marta Chango, from the *salanca* people, reiterates that the women would resist until the last moments. “We are mothers, women, and daughters, who come from the different provinces of the country to claim that the State, abusing its power, does not kill our people. This we will not allow” (our translation).

The use of traditional clothes, on the other hand, demarcated the identity of indigenous women, responsible for the preservation of culture. Moreover, as the demonstrations took place in cities, they used their best clothes, as explained by Mariana Yumbay, an active member of CONAIE and ECUARUNARI:

“I wear my hat myself, I wear my anaco (the skirt), I wear my bayeta (the shawl), my necklace, my embroidered blouses. It is not that we take off our clothes to go to the march. And as it is the city, obviously the women come with their best clothes to participate in this fight”. (our translation).

Indigenous women, at one point, tried to protest police violence by organizing themselves in new peaceful marches. As Rea (2020) recalls, the context was one of brutality:

On the 12th of October, when the repression by the State had already become a matter of social violence, in which people were seriously injured, who lost their eyesight, hospitalized, and dead, collectives of women called themselves together in a peaceful march, in order to protest the “paquetazo” and the violence that the demonstrators were experiencing, including girls and boys, women and the elderly. (REA, 2020, p. 5, our translation).

However, the women's march was also intensely repressed, and protesters were victims of physical and verbal violence. For the author, the State was collaborating with violence against these women, both those who take to the streets to guarantee their right to protest, and women who are inserted in political life. As a result, society ends up, unfortunately, endorsing this form of violence, with silence and normalization (REA, 2020).

In a Reuters¹³ article, Luisa Lozano, leader of women at CONAIE, states that the battle faced by indigenous women in the uprising was twofold: fighting to block Moreno's initiatives, while they needed to open spaces within the indigenous movement, still led by men. Even if the role of most women was less confrontational, since they were in charge of feeding the demonstrators, caring for the wounded, and protecting children – as they already do in their communities –, they were the ones who allowed their companions to give the continuation of strikes and clashes. Yet, some indigenous women also took a stand at the front, even being seen “carrying stones and cardboards for the protest”, according to Lineth Capucha, vice president of the Kichwa people of Pastaza, in interview with Reuters.

On the 13th and 14th, the Ombudsman's Office, which monitors human rights violations, declared around 1,200 people arrested, 1,300 injured, and 100 missings, but it is unclear how many of these were indigenous women. In a meeting with CONAIE leaders, the government of Lenín Moreno agreed to revoke Decree 833, publicly committing itself to a policy focused on providing the necessary fuel subsidies. It was an important victory for indigenous peoples, but in particular for indigenous women in Ecuador, who realized that it is still possible to keep dreaming.

4 Indigenous lives matter

In Ecuador, indigenous women were the main victims of the pandemic. They were subjected to more domestic violence (BARBÓN PÉREZ, 2021), were more prone to unemployment, and spent more hours dedicated to the family. They also became poorer and more susceptible to teenage pregnancies¹⁴. In indigenous territories, it was the female leaders who fought against the arrival of companies and miners, to maintain

¹³ Retrieved from: <https://www.reuters.com/article/ecuador-protestas-mujeres-idLTAKBN1WXIRH>. Accessed on: 19 jan. 2022.

¹⁴ Retrieved from: <https://www.fimi-iiwf.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/INFORME-COVID-Y-MUJERES-INDIGENAS-2-sept.pdf>. Accessed on: 5 sept. 2022.

control over the entrances to the community. As a result, they were constantly under threat. In addition to the inequalities they face regarding the difficulty of accessing health systems in rural areas, indigenous women were also forced to migrate to other regions, including urban ones, without any material and emotional support. Furthermore, the measures adopted by the government of Lenín Moreno, to manage the crisis, did not respond to the realities of these communities.

With the crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, indigenous peoples were confronted with the austerity policies of the Lenín Moreno government, which included budget cuts in the field of public health and catastrophic management of the pandemic. Ecuador was the first epicenter of Covid-19 in Latin America, and the city of Guayaquil was the face of this drama. The images of corpses abandoned in the streets of the city, due to lack of space in morgues and hospitals, traveled the world. Bereaved families had to wait up to 72 hours for the authorities to collect the bodies of the deceased who remained in the houses¹⁵. Images that went viral showed coffins and lifeless bodies strewn across Guayaquil, an exposed face of neoliberalism hitting the most vulnerable sectors (MOLINA PRENDES; MEJÍAS HERRERA, 2020).

The accumulation of bodies also undermined social distancing measures. Families, without complying with the restrictions of the Emergency Operations Committee (COE), remained with the deceased waiting for the Ministry of Health and police officials to carry out the declaration of death, burial, or cremation. On March 31, 2020, the newspaper *Diario El Universo*¹⁶ reported that 450 bodies on the waiting list had to be removed from their homes. Official data from April 1, 2020, allowed registering in the province of Guayas, where the city of Guayaquil is located, more victims of Covid-19 than in all Latin American countries. At that time, there were 60 dead and 1,937 infected (1,301 in the capital

¹⁵ Retrieved from: <https://www.bbc.com/portuguese/internacional-52129845>. Accessed on: 13 jan. 2022.

¹⁶ Retrieved from: <https://www.eluniverso.com/noticias/2020/03/31/nota/7801176/hay-450-cuerpos-recoger-guayaquil-lenin-ofrece-en-tierra-digno/>. Accessed on: 20 dec. 2021.

Guayaquil alone). In the same period, Colombia, for example, registered 16 deaths, against 27 in Argentina. One of the main problems that persisted among indigenous peoples was the lack of information, especially about their situation and specific needs. In addition, concerning the registration of cases and deaths from coronavirus, there is no accurate data. Indigenous peoples represent, though, 7% of the Ecuadorian population, with more than one million individuals.

The study by Vallejo et al. (2020) estimates that 41.6% of Ecuadorian households pay for public health services, based on basic indicators of the health situation in Latin America, this figure being the highest in the world. According to the authors, what happens in Ecuador is a dismantling of public health that also affects the situation of medical centers close to indigenous communities (p. 105). In Ecuador, given the stratification of the public health system and its limited government coverage of indigenous peoples, the capacity for care during the pandemic has been reduced. Faced with the inaction of the Ecuadorian Ministry of Public Health, indigenous organizations activated alliances with other groups, such as Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and universities, to implement communication and information strategies about the pandemic, as well as developing protocols, prevention in several indigenous languages, managing assistance from the brigades and implementing rapid tests and PCR (VALLEJO ANTROPÓLOGA *et al.*, 2020, p. 105).

Before the arrival of Covid-19 in Ecuador (the first reported case was confirmed on February 29, 2020), indigenous peoples were already suffering the consequences of extreme vulnerability (TUAZA CASTRO, 2020); nonetheless, with the pandemic, the situation worsened. In a report published by *Deutsche Welle* (DW) on August 4, 2021, there were more than 2,000 deaths of indigenous people in the Amazon because of the pandemic¹⁷. In the Ecuadorian part of the forest, the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of the Ecuadorian Amazon (CONFENIAE) reported

¹⁷ <https://www.dw.com/es/covid-19-letal-entre-ind%C3%ADgenas-falta-de-informaci%C3%B3n-y-de-estrategias-estatales/a-58761386>. Accessed on: 15 jan. 2022.

that among the 14 indigenous ethnicities, there were 50 confirmed deaths and 54 deaths with symptoms of the coronavirus. In an interview with DW, Carlos Mazabanda, coordinator of Amazon Watch in Ecuador, believes that this number is too large, as it concerns small populations. Across the subcontinent, many indigenous peoples have only recently encountered the outside world and remain vulnerable to these types of diseases, as their bodies lack an adequate immune response.

In the country, this event was dubbed the “third pandemic”¹⁸, which would be the result of the health crisis, the consequences of extractivism, and the marginalization of indigenous peoples by several governments. On April 7, 2020, an oil spill from the Trans Ecuatorian Oil Pipeline System (SOTE) and the Private Heavy Oil Pipeline (OCP) polluted the Coca and Napo rivers, greatly affecting the environment, water, food, and livelihoods of almost 120,000 people, including 27,000 indigenous people, mainly Kichwa and Shuar nationalities. An estimated 15,800 gallons (about 60,000 liters) of oil spilled into rivers. Kichwa communities living downstream did not notice the damage until the morning of April 8. Indigenous peoples demanded compensation for the damage caused and, considering that their rights were violated, the Federation of Municipalities of the Union of Indigenous Peoples of the Ecuadorian Amazon (FCUNAE) and CONFENIAE filed, on April 29, a protection action for approximately 120,000 people affected by the oil spill.

On the other hand, illegal extractivism was one of the main causes of the contagion of Amazonian peoples during the pandemic. Kichwa and Waorani women believe that ferry traders who entered by river and land, intending to extract wood, brought the virus into their communities. For them, the high rates of contagion are related to the oil, forestry, and mineral extractive dynamics, “intensified during the pandemic. In communities in the Wao territory in the provinces of Napo and Orellana, employees of oil

¹⁸

Retrieved from: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/pt/derramamento-petroleo-triple-pandemia-amazonia-equador/>. Accessed on: 12 jan. 2022.

companies from several wells operating in Yasuní maintained the rotation of teams of workers” (VALLEJO *et al.*, 2020, p. 100, our translation).

In the Ecuadorian case, indigenous women, as well as in the Citizens' Revolution of 2008 and the uprising of 2019, were also at the forefront to fight the lethargy of the government of Lenín Moreno. In direct care, they provided themselves with their ancestral wisdom and their knowledge of medicinal plants and other medical strategies to reduce the symptoms of Covid-19. Furthermore,

When contagions increased, those who did not get sick or did not have symptoms assisted others, helping them with care. They went to the chakras to collect crops to help them prepare food; so they overloaded themselves with work. Unlike the urban dynamics where everyone faces the pandemic, in the Amazon, the social fabric was activated and supported by women. (VALLEJO *et al.*, 2020, p. 102, our translation).

During the pandemic, they came together to demand better health services and denounce the fact that indigenous communities were heavily impacted by the pandemic. The lack of access to information, insufficient medical care, the marginalization of these communities, and the violation of their rights have only made them more exposed to the health, social and economic consequences of the pandemic, thus increasing their vulnerability. Indigenous women had to deal with the necropolitics of a State that lets them die and considers them disposable¹⁹ (MBEMBE, 2018). Therefore, protecting oneself from the pandemic was a privilege of class, gender, and race (MORAES, 2020).

Indigenous women, far from being fatalistic during the Covid-19 crisis, have interpreted the pandemic as an invitation to think about family and community and, above all, to act. Hence, they mobilized to combat, or at least try to reduce, the damage that murderous policies would bring to their future and that of their people. The participation and presence of indigenous women and their associations in this process of protest and

¹⁹ Here, death is the result of states and their racist and sexist institutions. Therefore, indigenous women and girls, as they form a group weakened by race, class, and gender, are more susceptible to becoming victims of necropolitics.

resistance to aggressive attacks by essentially anti-indigenous policies were not unprecedented. The organization of indigenous women both internally (with care for the elderly in times of Covid-19 and prohibiting outsiders from entering their territories, for example) and externally²⁰, revealed their deep political involvement in the community.

Since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, the most vulnerable women in the region have been hit hard by a wave of violence and neglect by those who are supposed to protect them. Faced with the failures of the government and the Ministry of Health in managing the pandemic, it was their different types of organizations that were able to prevent the spread of the virus (TUAZA CASTRO, 2020, p. 13, our translation). Throughout this moment of crisis, they found strength among themselves and their communities – because where the presence of indigenous peoples prevailed, the community's social fabric was what supported the action of these women. Against necropolitics, they resisted, united, and continue to fight so that their people could finally be treated with dignity. Armed with their voices and their bodies, they move forward.

5 Conclusion

Latin American indigenous women have historically been leaders who have taken the lead in the struggles of their people. Although their protagonism is often erased by forces that exclude indigenous people and women from political processes, their actions offered alternative paths beyond state policy. Its achievements, while denaturalizing the State as the sole locus of politics, also manage to bring its issues into the interior of the system. It was, for example, what happened in Ecuador with the participation of indigenous women in the Constituent Assembly that

²⁰ According to the regional report *Mujeres Indígenas de las Américas Frente a la Pandemia del Covid-19* (2020), indigenous peoples resorted to community radios and the use of loudspeakers to inform the indigenous population, using their own languages, on how to prevent contagion (p. 6). Retrieved from: <https://www.iitc.org/wp-content/uploads/Informe-COVID19-ECMIA.pdf>. Accessed on: 19 sept. 2022.

culminated in the new Constitution of 2008, as well as in several crucial moments that transformed the country.

The resurgence of Indigenous women's participation in the public sphere is a radical political project, as it is based on plural, shared, and community practices that consider the experience of being a woman and an Indigenous person in sexist, racist, modern, and colonial societies. In Ecuador, a country where the presence of the indigenous population is significant and, at the same time, their representation in political spaces is still small, having women who dare to impose themselves on a model that excludes and oppresses them is liberating. Whether participating in assemblies, occupying the streets, or empowering their epistemologies, these women continue a long trajectory of struggle. Bringing with them knowledge from their ancestors, they revolutionize politics daily.

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