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Master's Thesis of International Studies

**Indigenous women's political
participation at the community level:**

**The case of the Indigenous-Kichwa People from
Sarayaku-Ecuador**

지역 사회 수준에서 선주민 여성의 정치 참여:
사라야쿠-에콰도르 키츠와족 사례

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Development Cooperation Policy Program

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By

GOMEZ PUGA ESTEFANIA SARAI

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Abstract

Indigenous women's political participation at the community level: The case of the Indigenous-Kichwa People from Sarayaku-Ecuador

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Women's right to participation and representation in all spheres of life is vital in fully realizing their role as agents and beneficiaries of development. However, the efforts to measure and empower women in politics are often focused at the State level leaving behind other forms of political organization. In Ecuador, the right of self-government of indigenous peoples is recognized by the Constitution which implies the existence of an alternative governmental structure in which dynamics of gender and power also take place. In this context, what is the situation of indigenous women's political participation within the structures of indigenous self-governance at the community level? By using the case study of the Kichwa people of Sarayaku, an indigenous community located in the Amazon of Ecuador, I will analyze the factors that empowered women to occupy positions of power within the community government.

Keywords: indigenous women, self-government, political participation, political empowerment, community government.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Increasing women's political participation is one of the goals of part of the national and international agendas for achieving gender equality. Making sure that women occupy positions of power within political structures is fundamental for building democratic, inclusive and participatory societies for the better of all. Relevant political, legal, and social initiatives have been implemented all over the world to recognize the potential of women as political actors by giving them access to the highest hierarchal positions of decision-making at the State level. Women's right to equally participate in politics is currently recognized in international instruments, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women upholds women's right to participate in the decision-making of public life matters, the Beijing Declaration and Platforms for Action sets a wide range of actions to remove the barriers for women's political participation, while the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) establishes specific targets for achieving The latter instrument recognizes in target 5.5 the importance of women's political participation *at all levels*, as follows: "*Ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic, and public life*". (UN, 2015)

The target recognizes in a very broad way the importance of equal political participation of women across the whole hierarchal spectrum of political power. However, the indicators for tracking progress in achieving this target are limited as

they only focus on measuring women's political participation at the State level. For instance, the SDG measures focus on two indicators, 5.5.1a women's representation in parliaments, and 5.5.1b on women's representation in the local government. Other measurements such as the Global Gender Gap Political Empowerment subindex focuses on the gap between men and women across ministerial and parliamentary positions. Since the first World Conference of Women in 1995, the project for "engendering democracy" has been mostly addressed from the perspective of the dominant model of representative democracy, therefore, it has left behind women's political participation within alternative models of democracy such as community democracy.

Boaventura de Sousa, an expert in the study of the epistemology of the South, introduces the concept of *demodiversity* (Boaventura de Sousa, 2020) This concept is based on the coexistence of different forms of democracy in a given context. It seeks to reconcile political-institutional efficiency with social equity by recognizing that among the representative democracy, there are other forms of democracy such as participatory democracy, or communitarian democracy that "*constitute tools for decolonizing, decommodifying, and depatriarchalizing social relations, transforming society into places of democratization that traverse all the structural spaces of contemporary societies.*" (Boaventura de Sousa, 2020). Nonetheless, the novel aspect is that the other forms of democracy are not subordinated to the model of representative democracy which can only be achieved on the basis of the respect interculturality, a project that he calls *democratizing democracy* (Boaventura de Sousa, 2020). The epistemology of the South aims to decolonize knowledge in all forms, including research on gender and politics.

Democratizing democracy implies the expansion of the notion of the exercise of political power at all levels of decision-making by breaking down old notions of classical democracy. Recognizing other forms of democracy also implies the recognition of the responsibility of a wider range of the population, especially to the indigenous peoples of Latin America who have been historically discriminated against, and isolated from the decision-making processes at the State level. Giving back to ethnic minorities the power to make decisions for themselves implies the recognition that in multicultural societies exist different ways to exercise power that goes in hand with the culture, traditions, belief systems, and systems of organization and decision-making. Dussel (2006) argues that this model of democracy is based on questioning the current structures of the hegemonic system of democracy by acknowledging the need to recognize other forms of political organization from the bottom up.

Based on the guiding principles of plurinationality and interculturality, the 2008 Constitution of Ecuador recognizes a three-dimensional model of democracy - representative, participatory, and communitarian- These types of democracies have different institutional components. In the representative democracy, referendum, citizens' initiative, revocation of mandate, assembly, citizen participation, and consultation. In a participatory democracy, universal, direct, and secret votes for the election of political representatives. Finally, the communitarian democracy, the traditional norms, and procedures that the different indigenous groups use to choose, to nominate and to designate their own authorities and representatives. (Mayorga, 2013)

The community dimension of democracy implies that within the context of a

multiethnic society, the State's power is conditioned to respect, reserve, include, and promote cultural, social, political, and economic practices held by indigenous people, and other ethnic minorities. Therefore, the Ecuadorian democratic model recognizes communitarian democracy understood as the right of self-governance of indigenous -a right to manage their own affairs and elect their authorities through their own procedures-. (Mayorga, 2013) In this context, community democracy is a model inserted in indigenous political organization where the members of the community interact within well-defined institutional frameworks in order to make decisions in regard to matters on behalf of the interests of the community.

How is gender and community democracy related? Patriarchy is a cross-cultural and social structure that position women in a subordinated relation with respect to their counterparts, in a wide range of social, cultural, and economic interactions. Specifically, the exercise of political power in all societies and cultures has been in the hands of men, even though there are some exceptions in matriarchal societies. Nonetheless, the gender division of labor have permeated the social fabric of most societies, including ethnic minorities. In relation to the exercise of political power, the gender division of labor has historically favored men as they are considered to be the protagonist of public life, while women have been restrained to the matter of private life, such as family, and care work.

As stated in previous lines, gender discriminatory structures that impede women to fully participate in the public life, and occupy positions of power and influence, are currently questioned from the perspective of the hegemonic model of democracy, that combines with one single branch of feminism. However, we must question such models of analysis, and incorporate the epistemologies of the South into the

discussion of women's political participation. Community democracy and community feminism are good frameworks to start, therefore, we may ask: what is the situation of indigenous women in regard to their right to occupy positions of power within the structures of self-governance in their communities? In this thesis, I examine the case of one indigenous community in Ecuador in order to understand the gender dynamics that take place in the context of women's struggle for political power.

Need for this study

Focusing only on the issues of women's political participation at the governmental level is not compatible anymore with the three-dimensional model of democracy based on the recognition of plurinationality and interculturality. Without discarding the value of increasing women's participation in ministerial and parliamentary positions, it is imperative to incorporate alternative interpretations of democracy in the context of local realities, by considering the knowledge grounded in the experience of indigenous women that occupy positions of leadership within their communities or aspire to do so.

A bottom-up paradigm of women's political participation is needed in the research field in order to make visible the struggles of the most vulnerable women. I hope to contribute to the field of study of women's political participation with an intercultural perspective on indigenous women's political representation at the community level, by exploring and describing the factors that influence women's decision for pursuing positions of leadership in their communities, the challenges they face as leaders, the characteristics of the political environment of the community,

among other factors.

On such basis, the final goal of this dissertation is to contribute to a more complex understanding of the process of indigenous women's empowerment as political actors in their communities. The literature on indigenous women's political participation has focused on informal leadership (activism) mainly related to the protection of indigenous collective rights, and the environment. However, in the light of women's empowerment theory, there is still a lack of understanding of the factors that led indigenous women to occupy positions of power within the organizational structures of their communities, how gender-based expectations influence their political aspirations, and more generally, how indigenous women respond to these gender constraints.

Purpose and scope

The purpose of this dissertation is to explore the process of women's empowerment that enable them to become political actors in their communities and occupy influential positions of leadership. I will tackle two forms of political participation: informal participation (activism) and formal participation (positions of leadership in the community government) to understand how they interact and influence each other to empower women as leaders in their communities. The grand research questions that oriented this study is "How to explain the process or women's empowerment that led them to become political leaders in their communities?". Moreover, the purpose of this study is to examine the process of women's political empowerment from a gender perspective by taking into account their experiences individually and collectively. I have limited the scope of this dissertation to focus

specifically on the experiences of indigenous women that occupy a position of leadership in the indigenous community of the Kichwa people of Sarayaku, located in the Ecuadorian Amazon.

Personal motivation

Back in 2017, I was working as a researcher in a Human Rights Organization that offered legal support to victims of human rights violations, including indigenous people that struggle for their right to self-determination. I quickly became very interested in indigenous people's rights, cosmovision, ways of life, beliefs, and so on. My interest for indigenous affairs became later on in something I personally defended and started to be more involved in activism. During 2017-2018 worked in a research project about indigenous people and migration, and the case study the Kichwa people of Sarayaku. I had the amazing opportunity to share with the indigenous people of Sarayaku, a community that live in the middle of the Amazonian jungle in my home country Ecuador. For me it was really interest to see that Sarayaku women had a very relevant role in the politics of the community. Even though the roles of women and were still very well defined, and for the most part respond to the structure of the gender division of labor, I was quite surprised that among the most important leaders of the community, women were the most relevant. Their role as activist was incredibly strong, and at that time a woman was the president of the community governance. This led to me to wonder why this this was happening, and how could I possibly explain the process of empowerment of these women.

Site description

Sarayaku is an indigenous community from the Kichwa ethnic group, located in the Ecuadorian Amazon, in the province of Pastaza, on the banks of the Bobonaza River. It is composed of five communities (Sarayaku Centro, Kali Kali, Sarayaquillo, Shiwacocha and Chontayaku). The population is around 1,200 inhabitants who are politically organized under the community government called *Tayjasaruta*.

Sarayaku has achieved great national and international visibility since the social and political conflict they undertook against the Argentine Oil Company CGC back in 2002, and the triumph before the Interamerican Court of Human Rights. The case of Sarayaku after the international judicial body was of great importance for the indigenous people of the American Region due to the development of international jurisprudence regarding the free, prior, and informed consent of indigenous people.

During and after the international judicialization of the Sarayaku case, *tayjasaruta* (the community government) managed to generate links with several international NGO' such as Amazon Watch, Amazonia por la Vida, The Rights of Nature, and others. These organizations became Sarayaku allies until these days. In the national level, *Tayjasaruta* is a well-known indigenous government with important influence within the Ecuadorian indigenous movement. Several of the leaders have been representatives of the national indigenous organizations.

The transnational advocacy networks incentivized by *tayjasaruta* was the cornerstone that triggered the internationalization of the indigenous people conflict against the fossil fuel industries, and the neo-colonization processes promoted by the Ecuadorian State. "*The transnational activism of the leaders of Tayjasaruta is used*

as a mechanism to protect nature and their ancestral territories” (Arcos, 2016)

The Sarayaku people created a mechanism for national and international recognition, the *Kawsak Sacha*, or Living Forest Declaration, an instrument on which the Sarayaku people set the foundations for community development, and at the same time, it is a socio-political project that has served as a platform for its global action strategy. The *kawsak sachá* message has been spread to the world on different international forums such as the UN, COP20, and COP21, and through the different bodies of the Interamerican Human Rights System (Amazon Watch, 2022)

The communication skills of the Sarayaku people are also impressive, they created the documentary *Children of the Jaguar*, which won Best Documentary award at the National Geographic Film Festival in 2012 (Global Voices, 2013). The reputation that Sarayaku has gained in the last twenty years has made them stand out from other indigenous groups in Ecuador, and Latin America. Its remarkable organizational capacity headed by the community government *tayjasaruta* has positioned the Sarayaku people in the international political arena for the defense of indigenous people’s rights and their territories, and recently on the debates of climate change.

Chapter outline

In chapter two I review the literature on women’s political participation, and target two forms of political participation, the informal one (activism), and the formal one (within the political structure of self-governance). The literature gap consists of the lack of studies regarding the process and outcome of the political empowerment that indigenous women experienced during their path to becoming political actors within the structures of power of their communities. I explain such a process by using the

theory of empowerment. In chapter three I outline the qualitative methodologies used in this study. In chapter four I will introduce the gender system that operates in the community of Sarayaku. I will also explain the functioning of the self-governance structures, and the role of men and women in the politics of the community. In chapter five I will explain the process of the women's revolution that enable women to transition from the sphere of informal political participation to formal political participation. I will also tackle the personal experiences that women go through as leaders in the community.

CHAPTER 2

Literature review

Political participation of indigenous women at the community level

Reconceptualizing the exercise of women's political power outside the boundaries of state institutions is subject to analysis under decolonial feminism, a theory that *"engages with debates pertaining to coloniality/modernity and Global South indigenous identity and gender, while providing a space for the voices and experiences of silenced, "othered" women"* (Manning, 2021, p.1211) Therefore, a decolonial framework of analysis serve as a starting point to question the model of hegemonic democracy on which the women's political representation agenda has been founded, thereby, creating and sustaining a political model founded in western knowledge and dominance.

The decolonial theory recognizes the value of all knowledge and contributes to the establishment of a new framework that respect that *"demand respect for the pluralization of differences"* (Manning, 2021, p.1204), it implies a new way of understanding gender relations from experiences, culture and belief systems of the women from the South. Anthropology has contributed to understanding the political dynamics held in non-western societies with social and political structures that are organized based on kinship, gender hierarchies, and moral authorities (Curiel, Worthen, Hernández-Díaz, Aranda, & Puga, 2015). Using the decolonial feminist framework as a starting point, this thesis analysis the political participation of indigenous women within the traditional organizational structure in the community.

The political participation of indigenous women is analyzed under two parallel systems of governance: the national government system, and the indigenous self-governance system. The social structure of gender influences both institutional systems, in which the dynamics of power operate in different ways. The modalities and experiences of women in the exercise of political power are similar but at the same time different in both scenarios, as well as the opportunities to overcome the barriers that hinder women's access to the political sphere (Bonfil, Barrera, & Aguirre, 2008).

The research of women's role within the traditional governance of indigenous people have been studied from the lenses of two sociopolitical and anthropological branches (Bonfil, Barrera, & Aguirre, 2008). On one hand, it highlights the community as a sociopolitical space where conflicts are resolved collectively, and decisions are taken based on the common good on behalf of the community. This vision points out the sociopolitical conflicts between indigenous people and the national state, aiming for keeping alive indigenous culture by strengthening their traditional self-governance structures, and at the same time, highlighting the mechanisms of exclusion and subordination that keep them away from exercising political power at the state level. From this point of view, the subject of study centers on the obstacles faced by indigenous women to access positions of political power at the national level, considering factors such as ethnicity, gender, and class (Bonfil, Barrera, & Aguirre, 2008).

The second branch of research focuses on the gender and political dynamics of community governance. It documents the internal mechanisms of gender segregation within indigenous societies and cultural constructions of gender under which the

conceptions of political representation and power undermine indigenous women from involving in the political realm. The framework of analysis focus on the study of traditional institutions, patriarchal dynamics of power, and the manifestation of women's segregation in relation to the recognition of rights, access to justice, and political participation (Bonfil, Barrera, & Aguirre, 2008).

There are some studies that compile the experiences of indigenous women in the community politics. The UN Women Report *"Mujeres indigenas y política: Quise voz, porque las mujeres indigenas no tenias voces"*, identifies the worldview of women indigenous people from Paraguay regarding the politics, their trajectories, goals, and motivations that lead them to venture into politics, their ideas about participation, and representation in this field., the obstacles and the factors that influence their access, performance, and permanence in politics at the regional and community level (UN WOMEN, 2019).

In terms of the political participation of women at the community level, the study shows quantitative data about the rate of men and women in positions of leadership within the communities and collects qualitative data about their personal experiences, motivations, and struggles of women as community leaders. Women's stories' motivations for entry into politics are commonly related to the defense of their territories and collective rights for obtaining benefits for the communities, finding mechanisms to obtain support for projects, as well as influencing the decisions taken at the national level that might affect indigenous peoples (UN WOMEN, 2019).

This research shows a general view of indigenous women political participation. However, it does not differentiate between the two fields where political

participation can take place: the formal and informal sphere of politics. Additionally, it does not incorporate the process of women's political empowerment.

The formal and informal sphere of women's political participation

The dichotomy of the private and the public sphere has been key to examine how gender discrimination operates in a variety of fields. Rooting from the association of the public with masculinity and the private with femineity, the liberal branch of feminism argues that women have been historically excluded from the public domain such as politics, by limiting or restricting women's access to formal politics (Gavinson, 1992) which operates under publicly defined institutions, rules and procedures established by the State (Eilo Wing-Yat, 2007).

Such statement was latter on questioned by feminist scholars influenced by the post-apartheid experience of women in South Africa, who argued that while gender transformative actions in formal politics have a meaningful impact on women's equality agenda, informal politics such as women's collective action is needed to pressure state institutions for change (Hassim, 2002). Therefore, the traditional construct of the private as a non-political space, and the public as the active political space undergo a social and political transformation that brought to light the relevance of women's collective action to the political discussion table, and consequently, the recognition of women as political actors in all spheres of political discussion *"Effective change rather requires feminists' efforts both inside and outside the state and its institutions, and within both formal and informal politics."* (Miraftab, 2006, p.205)

Women's participation in activism have empowered women in such a way that it has

encouraged them to transit to other levels of political participation. When women become political activists, they rediscover themselves in a way that their self-perception is enhanced along with their capabilities of leadership. At the same time, their self-affirmation opens new spaces of reflection regarding their experiences as women, and the forms of oppression they experience. The process of empowerment of these women has occurred at the individual and collective level, they are both complementary (Carosio, 2012).

Indigenous women's political participation within their communities is focused on their roles as activists. Women's active participation in activism for the defense of their ancestral territories has been key to the resistance strategies of indigenous people against the extractivist model of development (Cabnal, Carvajal, Ruales, Cuenca, & others, 2015; CEPAL, 2014; IACHR, 2017) and others.

Even though the participation of women in social movements has increased significantly, there is still a lack of understanding of the gender phenomenon that occurs at the community level of governance. They recognize the importance of women's political participation in such spaces as it has the potential to tackle the very fundamental causes of gender asymmetries from the very bottom of societal institutions, the family, and the community. Women's active participation in informal politics has a profound sense of empowerment for them and have the potential to encourage women to transit to more formal spheres of political participation (Carosio, 2012). Is this the case as well for indigenous women? Does their participation in informal politics have empowered them to participate in the formal politics of their communities? To answer this question, other factors must be considered.

The gender factor plays a key role in the leadership of women in their communities. Therefore, a gender analysis on this matter has the potential to show the complexities that lie behind leaderships, demands and forms of political participation of indigenous women, by making visible the gender inequalities that have been historically justified by gender essentialist beliefs. Indigenous women face specific obstacles that hinder their right to exercise their rights in the context of their communities and organizations. Therefore, the factor of gender is determinant when it comes to the degree of exercising and demanding rights (Méndez, 2009).

In this sense, it is essential to deepen the analysis of the experiences of individual and collective empowerment of indigenous women. The main goal of this dissertation is to fill the literature gap regarding women's political participation at the formal level of community governance is. To analyze the process of women's empowerment in the politics of their communities, I will use two frameworks of analysis: the theory of gender as a social structure, and the multidimensional theory of empowerment. To do so, it is important to establish a broader framework of analysis that allows us to understand the gender dynamics that occur in the community organizational structure.

The gender approach and the gender division of labor

The gender approach is a category of social science analysis different from the concept of sex as it contributes to the analysis of the cultural constructions of femininity and masculinity in a certain context and historical time. The biological dimension determined by sex and the social construction of gender identity is defined as a set of characteristics, roles, hierarchies, attitudes, values, and symbols that

cultures attribute and impose on men and women which determine power relations. Gender about what it's like to be a man or woman are constructed on expectations that are socially created by individuals, groups, cultures, and societies, which reflect the societal values and beliefs about men and women. (Facio & Fries, 2005)

The gender as a social structure is an institutional order composed by norms and conventions that frame the conceptions and mentalities about what are the roles of men and women, as well as their aspirations. These rules and conventions conditioned the access of women to opportunities and limit the possible range of choices. This system relates to other order institutional systems, in a way that the modification of any of them, such as the family, the economy, politics, or culture, will affect the gender structure, and vice versa (Guzmán, 2003; Facio & Fries, 2005).

The structural roots of this system are the gender division of labor and the institutions (rules and norms) that determine the distributions of assets and opportunities in society among men and women. It is also built on a symbolic level as it sustains and reproduces conceptions, stereotypes, and collective imaginaries. This system has legitimized men the provision of more assets and resources -power, authority, symbols, services, and recognition- to certain institutional fields dominated by men. Social behaviors among men and women, the rules and norms that govern their behavior, and the representations of femineity and masculinity, are all the result of historical patterns, and implicit or explicit social pacts among different actors, groups, or collectivities (Guzmán, 2003; Facio & Fries, 2005).

Women have been traditionally in subordinated positions with respect to men due to their position in the gender division of labor. The dominance of men in the public

arena has implied that men's interests and necessities have impregnated public institutions, meaning that the ways of communication have been shaped in a way that responds to men's capacities and interests. The lack of women's control and power in the public arena has resulted in the exclusion of interests, ideals, demands, and experiences. In this regard, women are still facing barriers that hinder their right to access positions of leadership. Viewing gender as a structure allows us to understand the way gender shapes ongoing practices at the individual, interactional, and macro levels, and how it is through these practices that gender as a structure is sustained, challenged, and reproduced (Risman, 2018).

The definition of certain roles and responsibilities that indigenous Amazonian women and men have within the communities has been established traditionally over time. Thus, women have exclusive knowledge about reproductive cycles, care tasks, planting, and harvesting food for household consumption (PROAmazonia, 2019; Muratorio, 1998; Blanca, 2013). This division and the way in which gender and its specific roles are approached in the Amazonian communities influences the way how individuals and collective identities of indigenous people are constructed. There are three types of gender roles: reproductive (domestic work, childcare, home maintenance), productive (production of goods, services, and resources for sustenance), and political. Such division has implications in the sociocultural imaginary about the public sphere-masculinized (productive) and the private-feminized (reproductive) sphere of life, a fundamental dichotomy to characterize power relations in spaces of political participation (Dersnah, 2012).

The gender division of labor is a social structure that can potentially work as a foundation to understand the dynamics of power within indigenous communities.

Nonetheless, it is important to note that this model of analysis must be adjusted to the social, cultural, and economic model in which indigenous people are immersed.

Women's empowerment at the community level

As stated in previous lines, this dissertation will explore the process of political empowerment of the indigenous women from Sarayaku. In the following lines I will establish the theoretical framework of empowerment that will be used to explain the phenomenon of study.

The political dimension of empowerment refers to determining processes that have a positive effect on democratization and participation. To reach empowerment, people need to be involved in the decision-making processes of the matters that shape their lives (UNDP, 1995). Political empowerment is related to political participation, democratization, involvement in civil society movements, and participation of marginalized individuals and collectives in all levels of political power (Oakley, 2001).

The above definition of political empowerment includes the exercise of both formal and informal politics (Hassim, 2002). From this approach, women's political empowerment reflects the mobilization of women in formal and informal political spaces.

No longer can political empowerment be conceptualized as limited to the formal sector, including elections and political parties. It now must span new public and political spaces that, as yet, remain under-analyzed, raising new questions regarding women's voices and influence, the power of coalitions

that span from local to transnational levels, and new forms of accountability.” (Dersnah, 2012, p.2)

Scholars emphasize that women's empowerment starts from a place of disempowerment. In this regard, women's empowerment is *“inescapably bound up with the condition of disempowerment and refers to the processes by which those who have been denied the ability to make choices acquire such an ability”*. (Waghamode & Kalyan, 2014, p.1)

Most scholar have described empowerment primarily as a process. The process refers to showing action, activity, or structure that leads to empowerment. (Summerson, 2003) *“Empowerment is more than participation in decision-making; it must also include the processes that lead people to perceive themselves as able and entitled to make decisions”* (Rowlands, 1997, pág. 14)

Empowerment as a process is a button-up phenomenon that starts from the reconfiguration of social and moral relations, and the immersion of individuals in social and political spaces of action (Friedmann, 1992). Similarly, empowerment process is defined *“a process of increasing personal, interpersonal, or political power so that individuals families, or communities can take action to improve their circumstances”* (Gutierrez, 1990). By integrating the concept of empowerment as a process in conjunction with the feminist conceptualizations of identity and agency, Summerson (2003) presents a framework to understand the cyclical nature of the empowerment process: position, conscientization, interpretation, identity, and mobilization.

First, “position” is the point of departure from a disempowerment position. As a result

of the cyclical nature of empowerment, this position shifts as people acquire power through conscientization that leads them to the involvement of social action. Stressful life events can trigger the process of empowerment, creating a common consciousness with others, understanding the social component of individual problems, developing political skills, and engaging in collective action. Second, "conscientization" implies group identification, the development of collective consciousness, and the recognition of the political dimension of their conflicts. The recognition of the potential to change the *status quo*, and a resultant mobilization towards social change. Third, "interpretation" of the social context that allow women to identify sexist practices in personal and collective experiences in a context of patriarchal social and political realities. Fourth, "identity" construction refers to the personal rediscovery, and self-recognition of intrinsic value. Fifth, "mobilization" as the catalyst for action on the basis of personal and social transformation. This theoretical framework will be used to explain women's political empowerment in formal and informal politics, and the connection between both forms of making politics as an essential part of the empowerment process (Summerson, 2003).

Research methodology

Hypothesis, data, and research design

1. Hypothesis: The starting point of the political empowerment process of the indigenous women from Sarayaku started in their incursion in informal politics that later derived in their participation in the formal politics of the community.

To prove my hypothesis, I used a case study approach, a methodology that allows

the researcher to learn about a unique phenomenon *“that is used to generate an in-depth, multi-faceted understanding of a complex issue in its real-life context. It is an established research design that is used extensively in a wide variety of disciplines, particularly in the social sciences.”* (Crowe, Cresswell, & Robertson, 2011, p.1)

The chosen case study are the Kichwa women from the indigenous people of Sarayaku. situated in the Amazon Forest of Ecuador. They are one of the most influential indigenous communities in Ecuador and the Latin America region. Their international major recognition came after their legal international triumph against the government before the InterAmerican Court of Human Rights, back in 2012. Their impressive organizational skills and high levels of women’s participation in leadership positions have made them stand out from other indigenous communities. I will use my previous work experience with the community to collect the data.

I used a qualitative research methodology to analyze the process of political empowerment of the indigenous women from Sarayaku. This methodology aims to collect the experiences, and historical memory of women leaders to answer the main research question of this study: How to explain the process or women’s political empowerment that led them to become leaders, and occupy positions of power in the community governance?

I reached to one of the Sarayaku women I met three years ago, and she helped me to contact the women and schedule the interviews. In the first stages of my research, I tried to contact the women by myself, but it was difficult due to the time difference, and the women’s limited access to internet. I conducted semi-structured interviews with three women leaders from the community. The interviews were conducted via

WhatsApp because of the poor internet connection in the community. All the interviews were transcribed and translated into English.

For secondary data, I used information collected from international organizations of human rights, such as UN Women, Interamerican Court of Human Rights, Amnesty International, and Amazon Watch, previous thesis, research papers, anthropological reports, and other documents that have been written in the past about the Sarayaku community. The extensive literature written about the community was key to get information that was not relevant to ask in the interviews.

CHAPTER 3

The community government in Sarayaku

Tayjasaruta is the political and representative institution of the Kichwa people of Sarayaku. It is made up in two bodies: 1) The presidency, vice-presidency, and nine departments that functions as ministries: a. Women and family; b. Education; c. Management and community economy; d. Health; e. Youth; f. International Relations; g. Communication; h. Transportation; i. Territorial affairs; and j. Yachak (traditional sage); and 2) the traditional authorities called *kurakas* (Chávez, Lara, & Moreno, 2005).

Tayjasaruta leaders are chosen by the popular Assembly, the highest authority of the Kichwa People of Sarayaku. It is formed by all the Sarayaku people that live in the five communities of Sarayaku. Every three years, the Assembly are convoked to choose the new authorities of the *tayjasaruta*. The members are chosen among the candidates nominated by the Assembly. The Assembly in convoked every six months to evaluate the fulfillment of the work plans and obligations of the leaders. *Tayjasaruta* is a well-known organization with a high incidence within the Ecuadorian indigenous movement. Several of its leaders have been representatives of national indigenous organizations. (Chávez, Lara, & Moreno, 2005)

It is important to note that *Tayjasaruta* is a relatively new system of government. Before colonization, the first extended families were each headed by a man *leader*, called *yachak*. that were later on renamed by the catholic church as *kuraka*. ". After the founding of the Dominican order, the families grouped together around the church. The creation of the school, and the landing strip, consolidated such

relocation that entailed the conformation and redefinition of the authority and representation system of Sarayaku. The kurakas, the Assembly, and the government committee (...). The kurakas took all the decisions that concerned to the extended family” (Chávez, Lara, & Moreno, 2005, p.55)

In the traditional times, the *kurakas* use to be wise men, shamans, and warriors. To demonstrate their power, they carried a command baton. The missionaries considered them to be devilish, and found a way to control them. Since then, the missionaries were the ones to choose the *kurakas*, and handle them the command baston. After the expulsion of the catholic church, the Sarayaku people recover their right to choose their own authorities. However, some rules imposed by the church remained. Today, the *kurakas* are part of the *Tayjasaruta*, and are chosen by the Assembly. They are in charge of organizing the *minga*,^① inform to the people the important decision taken by the *Tayjasaruta*, act as conflict mediators, and other functions. (Chávez, Lara, & Moreno, 2005).

The gender division of labor in Sarayaku

The system of the division of labor that operates in the community of Sarayaku was influenced by processes of colonization. In the late nineties, the Ecuadorian government signed an agreement with the Catholic Church to evangelize and civilize the indigenous people of the Amazon region.

“The Dominican order imparted to women the Marian virtues of submission and sacrifice, and the contemplative attitude of holiness and passivity. The division between morality and politics were qualities of women and men,

^① An indigenous tradition of cooperative work for the common good such as fixing roads.

respectively. From the point of view of the Catholic Mission, women and tea chacra were men's property (...) they introduced a sexual division of labor based on the division of the reproductive and productive sphere " (Coba, 2020)

The roles of men and women are determined by biological and social preconceptions that place individuals in a certain social category where certain behaviors are expected to be fulfilled. This social phenomenon is called the gender division of labor, a social structure that determines the roles, activities, and behaviors expected from men and women in a certain context. In this section, I will explain how the traditional gender division of labor operates in the indigenous culture of the Sarayaku people, making an emphasis on the role of women in community politics.

The economic activities that are more time-consuming are related to food production, mainly for self-consumption. A small proportion of the food is sold or interchanged. The main economic activities are subsistence agriculture, hunting, food gathering, and fishing. Crafts making, canoe and house building are also important. Handicrafts are commercialized outside the community (Chávez, Lara, & Moreno, 2005).

Agriculture, pottery, food and *chicha*^② preparation are feminine activities, while hunting, house-building, fishing, *shigra*^③, and hammocks-making, are masculine activities. Most of the cultivate crops are for self-consumption, just a small portion is commercialized. There are also remunerated activities such as communitarian

② Chicha is a fermented, or non-fermented traditional beverage

③ Shigras are hand-woven bags made of natural cabuya fibers.

tourism, and the income perceived for public teachers. The income is generally used to buy clothes, salt, soap, cookware, and tools for farming, hunting, and fishing (Chávez, Lara, & Moreno, 2005; Guzmán M. , 1997)

As stated above, gender roles are clearly defined in Sarayaku, there are gender roles that have been kept intact, for instance, women play the roles of caregivers, work in the *chacra* where they plant and harvest their food, make the *chicha* beverage for the family, take care of the children and the husband, while men construct the houses, go for hunting. However, the line that divides the public and the private, the productive and reproductive sphere, is not that clear. This division of labor does not strictly refer to the typical division of productive-reproductive roles because even though women do dedicate their time to reproductive tasks, they are also in charge of productive activities. Indigenous women work as hard as men in the community, and the workload is even greater in the case of women who occupy positions of leadership in the community.

Women’s immersion in the political debate of the community

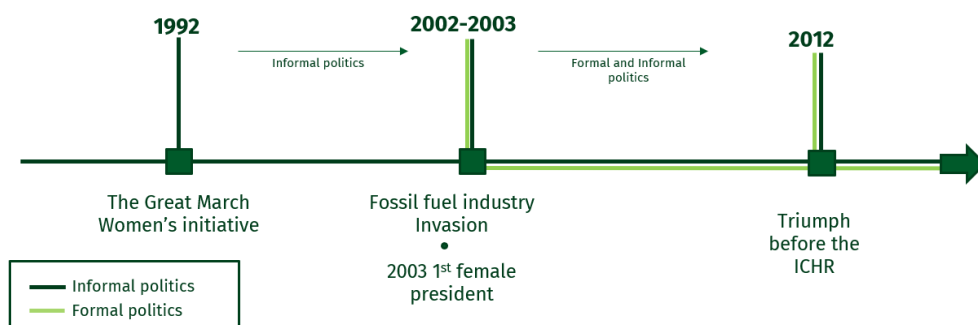


Fig. 1 Time line of historical events that triggered women’s political participation

Sarayaku is a democratic community with a well-established government - *tayjasaruta*- and an Assembly, an organic institutional structure that allows the

community to make decisions on behalf of the community's interests. In such a scenario, the political participation of women is outstanding at the community government, as well as in other political spaces (informal politics) in the national and international arena. How did political empowerment start for Sarayaku women? If empowerment is a process, which was the factors that triggered the process of women's political empowerment in the community? I will present and discuss the turning points that open women's opportunities to involve in the formal and informal politics of the community. Later, I will focus on the current situation of women's leaders to understand the social, cultural and political context in which indigenous women exercise their leadership.

Informal politics: The trigger for Sarayaku women's empowerment

During the nineties, the indigenous people's movements from South America started to raise their voices and became very active in the public arena before the oil industry boom that directly affected their territories, and Sarayaku was not the exception. During the neoliberal decade between 1980 and 1990, the oil concessions increased, as well as the indigenous collective movements and political organizations. There was a slight difference between them in terms of organizational structures even though they were interdependent. In the collective movements, men were usually the heads of the organization, however, on some occasions, women occupy those positions too. On the other hand, the structures of indigenous political organizations were fully male dominated (Coba, 2020).

The march of 2002

In 1992, various indigenous groups from the Amazon undertook the initiative to

mobilize towards Quito, the capital of Ecuador, to demand the government the legal recognition of the collective property over their territories in order to guarantee their right to be consulted to prevent the states' illegitimate attempt to concession their territories (Coba, 2020).

It was the women's initiative that encourage men to leave the Sarayaku community towards Quito by walking 250 kilometers, for 8 days, with one goal in mind, the legal recognition of their collective property. The starting point for Sarayaku women's political empowerment was their incipient participation in the politics of the community. Beatriz Gualinga was the leader of the movement, even though she did not have any position of leadership in the community Government (Coba, 2020; Martinez & Agra, 2019).

The Sarayaku people, along with the indigenous communities from the Amazon, camped in the Eljio Park for about fifteen days. Women were in the frontlines of resistance; their position was strategic because the police did not attack women with children. Fifteen days passed by, and the government did not approach them at all. Just when they were about to lose hope, the government announced their readiness for dialogue. Beatriz Gualinga, the leader of the Sarayaku movement, was chosen to speak out on behalf of the indigenous communities in the Amazon. (Coba, 2020)

Beatriz Gualinga's speech transformed the national political scene, she spoke on behalf of the indigenous people from the Amazon, translating their needs and claims. *"Thus, she exercised her right as a woman to enter the public sphere in politics, which was a space only for men. Without a doubt, the great march shaped a different sense of history (...)." (Coba, 2020)*

Over the years, during the heat of the anti-colonization resistance, and despite poor representation of women in indigenous organizations, women as a collective shaped their own critical thought and incentivized actions of protest under their own imaginary of anti-colonial resistance against the state and the multinationals corporations. Beatriz Gualinga is remembered as the first women leader in Sarayaku thanks to her commitment, authority, leadership skills and ability to speak in public. (Coba, 2020). This event shows that women's immersion in politics was a gradual process that started as a collective action of resistance. At that time, indigenous women speak on behalf of indigenous people as a homogenous collective, and there was no feminist tint in Beatriz political discourse. However, her intervention had a deep symbolic meaning that represented the uprising of indigenous women against the capitalist and patriarchal order that exclude them from the public sphere of their communities.

Samai Gualinga, a 32 years old women, and ex leader the department of communication, describes the process of women's political participation from two historical moments:

Women's leaderships were always respected, women were the leaders of the 1992 march, and because of that we were able to obtain the collective property title of our territories. However, it was not until 2002 and 2003, that women became very relevant in the politics of the community. The conflict against the fossil fuel company CGC was the trigger for the full involvement of women in the community government. This was a historical event that marked a before and after in the political participation of the Sarayaku women. In the nineties, women's political actions were centered

in the defense of the territory. However, after the conflict with the oil company, women started to gain spaces in the community government. (Gualinga S. , 2022).

I have heard histories that since even before 2002, women were already gaining spaces in the community (...) *I was fifteen years old when the conflict with the CGC happened, I remember that women's work was very though*

In 2002, a group of 20 women captured the employees from the CGG, and with its own forces, disarmed the military men that accessed the territory without the authorization of the Sarayaku people. At that time, because of the 1992 march, the people of Sarayaku already had legally obtained the title of collective property over their ancestral territories, therefore, any intromission of the government into their territories must have been properly consulted with the community. Before the lack of consultation, women took the initiative to resist against the military occupation

This episode was captured in the film *Soy Defensor de la Selva*, a documentary that narrates the resistance process of the community before the attempt of the Argentinean extractivist industry CGC to enter their territories. One of the film scenes show a helicopter arriving beside the river, after a few minutes, a couple of indigenous men got down from the helicopter. A group of Sarayaku women shout them heatedly, asking for explanations about why they were working for the company. Later scenes show a group of soldiers blocking with chains the Bobonaza River, where indigenous people have navigated through for centuries (Gualinga E. , *Soy defensor de la selva*, 2003).

The documentary was later on presented as evidence before the Interamerican Commission of Human Rights back in 2004. It shows the experiences of the Sarayaku people during the conflict with the fossil fuels company. "*Women, with his little children, were facing the armed invaders, under the supposition that they would not be so violent towards women as they were with their husbands, brothers, and sons.*" (Cevallos, 2019, p.9)

Ena Santi, ex leader of the women's commission of the community government, speak out during the hearings before the Interamerican Commission of Human Rights, and testified that during the emergency decree emitted by the community government, the Sarayaku people created the "camps of life and peace", to protect the boundaries of the indigenous territory to prevent the entry of the oil company workers and the military. These establishments were situated strategically all along their territory; each one of them harbored around 60 to 100 people, among men, women, and children. During six months, the Sarayaku people lived in these camps, and all economic and social activities of the community were suspended 's responsibility was to look and intercept the company workers to avoid the installation of explosives during the oil exploration phase. (Cevallos, 2019; Chávez, Lara, & Moreno, 2005; Martínez & Agra, 2019)

The main pillar that allowed Sarayaku to resist against the illegitimate entry of the fossil fuel company without giving up, was its remarkable organizational capacity of *Tayjasaruta*, the community government (Cevallos, 2019). During this conflicting time, the remarkable presence of women in the defense for their territories, led the popular Assembly of the community to nominate, and choose Hilda Santi, as the first woman elected as the president of *tayjasaruta*. She won the elections with 85% of

the votes which was a clear sign that women gained legitimacy in the community during the conflicting times the community went through defending their territories. (Martinez & Agra, Nuevos sujetos, nuevas narrativas: la Naturaleza y el Pueblo de Sarayaku, 2019)

The case of the Kichwa people of Sarayaku against the Ecuadorian State was finally internationalized before the Interamerican System of Human Rights. In 2012, the Interamerican Court of Human Rights emitted a favorable sentence on behalf of the Sarayaku People, and declared the international responsibility of the Ecuadorian State. Mario Melo, one of the lawyers that defended the Sarayaku people before the Interamerican Court, wrote in his book about the memories of the internationalization of the Sarayaku, the following lines:

The women from Sarayaku are brave strong and determined. Men are usually the ones that quit. Men leaders in indigenous communities historically have had a closer interaction with the exterior world in contrast with women. Therefore, men are more prone to succumb to the pressures of external actors. On the other hand, women have been more attached to the family, the physical and cultural reproduction, they have a deeper connection with nature, with children, and all these circumstances make women the primary defenders of their territories, they set the foundations to the defense of their lands. The great achievements of Sarayaku is the achievement of their incredible women who over the years have become national and international icons in the ecological movement such as Patricia Gualinga, Ena Santi, and other women leaders (Cevallos, 2019, p.61)

In conclusion, two historical moments in the history of the people from Sarayaku marked a before and after for women during their participation in the community conflict in 1992 and 2003-2004, and later during the years that the international legal battle lasted until 2012. Women were more and more visible in the politics sphere at the community level, but also at the national and international level. The defense of their territories, and the active participation in protests, collective movement, forums, and so on, contributed to the process of their political empowerment as they acquired important skills to stand out for the interest of the community, and without knowing, for their interest as women too. Their political empowerment was a reciprocal process between them and the community, they demonstrated their capacities of leadership, and with that, they transformed the gender norms that exclude them from the community politics. In return, the community trusted them and started to nominate them for the community government positions.

CHAPTER 4

Women's initiation in the community politics

I have noted that the community has a deep sense of respect for women's leaders. The community, including men, trusts women in leadership positions. They believe in their capacity to lead and respect their voices and opinions in the decision-making process. (...) Women are trusted to occupy leadership positions because the community knows that women have a deep relationship with the land, and because of that they will defend the territory with their hearts. (Gualinga S. , 2022)

The community not only recognizes the ability of women to hold positions in the community government, but also encourages them through the traditional system for the nomination of authorities. In accordance with the democratic processes established by the Sarayaku people, every three years the Government convenes an Assembly to elect the new government authorities. An *ad hoc* committee is established to proceed with the nomination of the potential candidates for each of the 11 leadership positions, the committee is preceded by respected people from the community. Subsequently, each of the nominees proceeds to accept or rejects the candidacy out loud in front of the community assembly. In relation to the last point, it is important to mention that in the communities there is no party system as it happens in traditional democracy, but the candidates are elected directly by the People.

The involvement of Sarayaku women in the politics of their communities, whether they act as defenders of their lands, or have occupy a position of power within the

community government, have taken place because of social and political transformations at the individual, relational and community level.

Samai, a 33 year old women, and ex leader of the communication department of the community government, says that she started to involve in the politics of the community when she was 20 years old. She studied Graphic Design in college, and because of that, the community government asked her involvement in the communication matters of Sarayaku.

“While I was studying back in college, the community always asked me to help with the publicity, graphic identity, posters, and social media management of the community. Several times the community government offered me a position of leadership in the communication department, but I did not accept because I was still studying. When I finished my career, I came back to live in Sarayaku, and the community government offered me the leadership again and I accepted it. It was not something I was looking for, the community needed me and that why I accepted the leadership. (Gualinga S. , 2022)

Abigail Gualinga, a 26-year-old women, headed her first leadership when she was nineteen years old. Before the government nominates her for the leadership, she was already working with for community.

“ (...) since I can remember, I saw my parents fighting for our territory, I was 5 or 6 years old when the conflict with the fossil fuel industry occurred. Since I was very young, I helped the community with anything they asked for, I was very active in the community affairs” (Gualinga A. , 2022)

I want to highlight some key issues regarding the community governance in Sarayaku. First, as stated by the interviewees, they had previous experience with the management of community affairs before the community government offered them a position of leadership. The community make sure that the person who is going to be nominated for any leadership position, have had previous experience managing any matters of interest for the community. Otherwise, they would not gain any votes in the final verdict of the popular Assembly.

However, things have changed a lot since the nineties, a time when women leaders did not have the access to higher levels of education, and therefore, the nomination of women for leadership positions was not linked to their educational expertise. Interestingly, as it was the case for Samai Gualinga, having a bachelor's degree did not encourage her to leave Sarayaku. On the contrary, she used her knowledge as a tool to contribute to the common benefit of the community. She clearly states that she was not looking for the leadership, but she accepted because the community requested her to do so.

On top of that, the process to nominate a candidate is completely different from the traditional model of democracy and representation. *“There are no candidates for the presidency, or any other leadership position, people cannot nominate themselves. The nominees are first chosen, they accept or not the nomination, and then the community decides which one will get the leadership”* (Gualinga S. , 2022)

In these lines, we can infer that the nature of governance and leadership in indigenous communities is completely different from the ones of the Western world. Even the concept of power is not mentioned at all. There are no political parties, leaders are

nominated and chosen by the community, and the leaders put the community interest even over their own interests. Moreover, the interests of the community are their personal interest too.

Family lineage and women's leadership

Apart from the experience that the candidates might have, there is another important factor that influences the nomination of the candidates: family lineage. Before explaining such phenomenon, it is important give context on the family system that take place in Sarayaku. The social setting is organized in a set of systems that complement each other, which are influenced by family ties, and the right to acquire property on the basis of land use. Each of the five communities^④ is composed by extended families known as *ayllus*. The *ayllus* are conformed by nuclear families, known as *huasi*, which are formed by a couple, and their descendants (Reeve, 2002 cited by Chávez, Lara, & Moreno, 2005).

The extended families are not closed unities, on the contrary, families are connected among the different communities. Therefore, there is no direct and steady correlation between consanguinity and territory, since family alliances reshape the family territories.

- **Sarayaku Centro:** Gualinga, Shiguango, Manya, Aranda, Santi, Canelos Cisneros, Malaver, Viteri, Mayancha, Guerra, Machoa, Gualinga, Andi y Dahua.
- **Shiwacocho:** Gualinga, Manya, Santi, Illanes, Vargas.
- **Sarayaquillo:** Santi, Aranda, Cuji, Gualinga, Canelos.

^④ Sarayaku is composed by five independent communities: Sarayaku center, Sarayakillo, Chontayaku, Cali-Cali, and Shiwacocho

- **Chontayacu:** Cuji, Inmunda, Machoa, Malaver, Gualinga, Gaya, Vargas, Illanes, Cedeño.
- **Cali-Cali:** Machoa, Gualinga, Malaver, Dahua.
- **Tereza Mama:** Mayancha, Aranda, Gualinga, Santi, Castillo, Suárez, Grefa (Chávez, Lara, & Moreno, 2005, p. 33)

Women leaderships were very strong, however, most of them shared the same family name, Gualinga.

I come from a family of leaders, my father has always supported the community, people believe that I have the leadership skills in my blood, and we have never been against what the community want from us. We have grown seeing our parents defending our territories, and they are our role models, in part this is what I have chosen to be a leader. (Gualinga S. , 2022)

Belonging to the Gualinga a factor that influences the candidate nomination. Even this is a determinant factor for the decision of women to accept a leadership position.

I headed the first leadership when I was nineteen years old. Well, I was pressured to accept the nomination in the community assembly, because when they nominate you, sometimes you feel a lot of pressure to accept the nomination because of your family name. (Gualinga A. , 2022)

Maricela Gualinga, the vice-president of the community also shares the pressure of the family name. *“before I was nominated for the vice-presidency position, my dad talked to me and said that I cannot reject the nomination. The members of my family have been leaders for generations” (Gualinga M. , 2022)*

Most of the women who occupy positions of power hold the Gualinga family name.

Nonetheless, it is important to note that not all the families that share the same last name are not blood related (Chávez, Lara, & Moreno, 2005). Therefore, there is no a single Gualinga family. As stated by one the interviewees, “(...) *there are different ramifications of the Gualinga family.*” (Gualinga S. , 2022)

One of Gualinga family ramification are known to have a leadership lineage. The three women I interviewed belong to this family ramification. Abigail Gualinga (26) and, Maricela Gualinga are sisters, while Samai Gualinga (33) is their cousin. There are other influential women from this family, for instance, Patricia Gualinga (52), Nina Gualinga (27), and Helena Gualinga (19), all of them who are internationally known in the indigenous people, and climate change movements.

However, this does not mean that women with different family names cannot occupy positions of leadership. For instance, the first women president, Hilda Santi (back in 2002) held that family name Santi, while the second president, Miriam Cisneros (back in 2017) held the family name Cisneros.

There are other families who have a lineage of leadership other that the Gualinga. For instance, the Santi and Viteri families, who in some cases are also related to the Gualinga family. Most of the people in Sarayaku have the spirit to defend our territory. (Gualinga S. , 2022)

In this line, we can see that for instance, during the government period 2017-2023, other women elected to occupy positions in the community government for last two periods of government:

	Name	Headed position
2017-2020	Miriam Cisneros	President
	Maura Ikiam	Women and Family
	Hilda Santi	Education
	Samai Gualinga	Communication
	Abigail Gualinga	Youth
	Colombina Aranda	Traditional sage
	Carmenza Malaver	Department of treasury

Figure 2. Positions held by women during the government period 2017-2020. Source: Sarayaku.org

Leaders' accountability mechanisms and performance

Men and women leaders are held accountable before the community. Every six months, the community government calls to all the members of the community to a general assembly in which the leaders inform the fulfillment of their work plans. In terms of the expected results, the community does not have bigger expectations from the women's leadership results in comparison to men. However, if the results are not the expected ones, then there is a differentiated reaction community about men and women.

“What is expected for women is expected for men too. What matters are the achieved results, whether the leader is a man or a woman...there is a difference when a man leader fails, and a women leader fails. For instance, if a man fails, he is judged individually, however; if a women leader fails, all women will be judged.” (Gualinga S. , 2022)

Therefore, the community is harsher on women leaders when they fail, in comparison to men's failure. The failure of one woman is the failure of women as a collective, while the failure of one man is judged individually. This differentiated sense of judgment from the community might suggest that men and women are still not equally treated as leaders, especially when it comes the perception and consequences of failure.

Additionally, women perceive that their performance in leadership positions are directly related to the support that they receive from their families.

"When I was a leader, I had the support of my family, and my parents. However, when it was difficult when I had to travel. All the work done by the leaders is voluntary, we don't get paid for it. Therefore, it is difficult to provide for the family because the economic burden is over one person, and that creates conflicts in the household" (Gualinga S. , 2022)

Women leaders face a lot of pressure from their families, and the community when they have a leadership position because the caregiver role is natural, and exclusively a role of women. The effects of such double burden on responsibilities will be explained in the next section.

Barriers that hinder effective leadership

In a recent interview done by the magazine *Latino Revels*, as part of the interview series *Voces del Jaguar* [voices of the Jaguar], Sabine Bouchat -a Belgian woman that has been married for 35 years with an indigenous man from Sarayaku- shared her experience as a woman living in Sarayaku for the last 25 years:

“The work is hard for both men and women but men still have more power comparing to women. If you look at this situation from a superficial point of view, men do have more decision-making power than women. The wife will follow the husband, her life revolves around him and the children. For men is easier to go out and move around. (...) Women in the Assembly have the same decision-making power as men, this is not an issue here. The problem occurs at the household level.” (Latino Revels, 2018)

Women’s access to the community politics does not mean that the Sarayaku community is gender equal in other areas of life. The division of labor is still very clear to what men and women can do. Even though women’s access to leadership positions have increased substantially, and the conceptions of people towards women’s capacity to lead have positively shifted over the years, there is a parallel reality that still attach women to the private sphere.

Women leaders are respected in the community; however, these women go through certain difficulties in their daily lives. Women still carry all the burden of caregiving, which is now influencing women to reject the positions of leaderships. There is a good number of leaders in the community, but there is still no perfect equity between men and women. (Gualinga S. , 2022)

Interestingly, the system of the gender division of labor in the community have gone under important changes such as the inclusion of women in the politics of the community, but at the same time it still maintains a defined division in other areas of socialization. While women have gained space in the traditional male-dominated sphere of politics, on the contrary, men have not gain spaces in the private sphere

traditionally dominated by women.

This scenario is similar to what it occurs in western societies as well. Women's access to the public sphere (such as political positions and the workforce) does not necessarily mean less burden for women at the household level. While there are incentives for women to participate in the public sphere, there are no incentives at all for men to share the responsibilities at the household level. Therefore, women face a double burden of work due to the responsibilities they face in both spheres of life.

This phenomenon take place because even though gender norms permeate both public and private sphere, the ones that rule the latter are unseen, taken for granted, and less questioned. In order to transform these patterns of behavior that put more weight on women's shoulders, it is necessary that men take part in the discussion as well. Changes in the gender structure at the household level will only be achievable if there are policies that involve men and women in the process, and this has not been a priority in the gender equality agenda. Contrarily, there are plenty policies and international initiatives towards gender equality in the public sphere which additionally are easier to measure.

Something similar occurs in the case of the Sarayaku community, although in a very different context. Women's political participation was triggered by an external factor that threaten the wellbeing of the community. Women's involvement in the political discussion, activism, and leadership was not only a matter of gender equity but also survival for the community. Therefore, in such context of sociopolitical conflict with the Government, the participation of women was more of a duty that an option. The

gender system that segregated women from the decision-making process in the public arena was forced to shift towards a more gender equal system in the public sphere.

Meanwhile, the gender system at the household level remained untouched, and even unquestioned. The community as a whole put a lot of effort to develop a political position to defend their rights as indigenous people, and for over two decades, the priority of the community was focused on the defense of their territory to prevent the occupation of extractivist companies. Therefore, the issues that were occurring at the household level were no priority for the community, and the unequal distribution of care responsibilities remained unspoken.

Women leaders are expected to fulfill their roles as leaders, and caregivers too. Because of this, the community has the misconception that women might not be able to lead a position of great responsibility, such as the presidency, or vice-presidency of the community. This generalized perception does not have to do with the belief that women lack the capacity to do so, but because heading a leadership could imply that women have to quit totally or partially to their responsibilities in the household in order to dedicate time to the tasks that the leadership position demands.

(...) there is the perception that women cannot have a leadership position that demands a lot of effort and time. I think this will depend on the women, for instance, some women have failed in such positions, but there are others who have done it very well. We have had cases in which women have reached important leadership positions, but because of that, they have abandoned their responsibilities at home, they have abandoned their children, they have

lost their value as women. On the other hand, there has been women who have has a remarkable leadership, and at the same time, they been able to take care of the children, the husband, and the household. (Gualinga S. , 2022)

It is noteworthy that there is a generalized perception of the community, including some women, regarding the fact that it is women's responsibility to take care of the household, on top of their responsibilities as leaders. The traditional conception of women as caregiver is so deeply embedded in the community imaginary that a transgression to such responsibility implies the loss of value of that woman. Therefore, it is inferred that a good women leader must have the ability to do good in both roles, as a leader and caregiver.

There are rooted structures in the community that tend to judge women when they cannot fulfill their responsibilities as mothers. Couple fights are also very common because the wife has a leadership position. In the beginning, the husband agrees that the wife accept the leadership position, but this does not last long (...) I remember that when I was the leader of the youth commission, I had to attend the work meeting with my little daughter. My husband was a leader too, and when he had a meeting, I had to carry my daughter with me to the chacra. I was mad because my husband did not want to take care of my daughter while I was working, and this situation happens even in young couples. In couples from the old generation is even worse (..)
(Gualinga A. , 2022)

For women, involving in the community formal politics not only mean gaining voice

and influence in public affairs and decision-making on behalf of the community interest, it also implies challenging other traditional genders. Even though the interviewees accessed political positions with the support of their families, there were not exempt from the criticism of the community for putting aside their traditional roles as caregivers, mothers, and wives. Nonetheless, the younger generations of women are questioning the disproportionate burden of work, and such issue are being spoke out inside the families as well.

Related to the issue of the double burden of work that the Sarayaku leaders women face, it is important to note that the work of a leader is unpaid, it is one hundred per cent voluntary. Therefore, contrary to the double burden in western societies that refers to the workload of women who work at paid jobs while also having the responsibility of unpaid work, women in indigenous communities such as Sarayaku face a double burden of unpaid work only. *“The leaderships are honorific, they are not paid, for three years, leaders invest a lot of time, effort, resources and energy for the wellbeing of community”* (Gualinga A. , 2022)

It must also be considered that for the most part, the Sarayaku community is a subsistence economy, therefore, precipitated conclusions regarding this issue must be avoided if the cultural factor is not considered. Gender relations must be understood holistically, and the macro factors such as the economic model or culture must be considered in the analysis to avoid making assumptions. Because of this topic exceeds the purpose of my research, I will not go deeper into it. However, there is an open door to more research regarding the double burden of work of indigenous women in the context of subsistence economies.

A decreasing number of women in leadership positions?

According to the interviewed women, there seems to be a decrease in women's leaderships. Here is no clear trend to make such statement. However, one woman mentioned that there was an important decrease of women's leaderships in the present government period (2020-2023) comparison with the previous period of government (2017-2020).

In this period of government there are less women than men in leadership positions. Three years ago, women were majority, there were women in the departments of women and family, the youth, health, education, presidency, communication, in total we were six women and five men. This period there is only one woman in the vice-presidency, and one women in the women and family department. (Gualinga S. , 2022)

Even though there was no clear explanation to why this happened, other women mentioned the following:

Women leaders have a of problems with their husbands. Some of them must ask their husband first to accept the nomination. Women are still nominated for the leadership's positions, however, a few of them accept the nomination. I think the reason is because they do not want to have problems with the husband. (Gualinga M. , 2022)

If this assumption is correct, women leaderships are in danger not because the community government does not nominate them, but because they do not have the support needed to accept the nominations. The gender structure in the community is

in this sense contradictory. Women have gone through a long process of empowerment that allowed them to acquire the confidence, and skills to exercise such positions. They have managed to open up spaces for them, and the community as a political actor trust woman. However, institutional changes in the community, and the transformation of the collective perception towards the potential of women as political actors, is not necessarily linked to the transformation of family norms and traditions.

Types of leadership held by women

One of the topics regarding the debate of women and politics is the higher presence of women in certain fields of political expertise. In the national level, once women have access to ministerial positions, there is a generalized tendency to allocate women in social affairs positions, while men are mainly in the financial sector. This tendency is also present in the community of Sarayaku.

Women can access to any of the eleven leaderships positions; however, the leadership of women and family department has never been headed by a man. Women usually lead in the educational and health department (...) the only leadership position that women have not occupied is the territorial affairs, because it is a very hard job, it's very demanding to walk for eight or nine hours straight (Gualinga S. , 2022).

Therefore, the nomination of the candidates for the different position of the community governance is not aleatory. Added to the capabilities that women and men must demonstrate with its previous experience in the community affairs, the nomination of authorities follows other criteria as well. For instance, gender roles

play an important role in the nomination of women for the “women and family” department. Even the fact that the affairs of women and family are treated under the same department, is a clear sign that the role of women is still very attached to the family issues.

In this line, it makes sense that men have never been heads of this department. On the contrary, the only department that women have not been nominated for is for the “territorial affairs”. According to the interviewees, there is biological justification behind the lack of women’s representation in this position as the nature of the job requires a lot of physical strength. Additionally, this leadership position demands a lot of time away from home. Therefore, the lack of women’s representation in this area seems to be related to biological as well as cultural constraints. Women are expected to take care of the children, and the household, therefore, spending time away from home to fulfill the leadership responsibilities is not well perceived by the community. In conclusion, it seems that the leadership nominations, and designation to some of the departments (particularly the family and women; and the territorial affairs) correspond to the normative gender division of labor.

The adoption of the gender quota system

During the presidential period between 2017-2020, Miriam Cisneros, was elected president of the community government. She was the second woman who occupied this position after Hilda Santi, back in 2012. During Miriam Cisneros’ presidency, an important decision was taken to guarantee the equal participation of men and women in the presidency and vice-presidency of the community.

The government said that there must be a man and a woman in the

presidency and the vice-presidency. If a man is the president in this period, then a woman will be president in the next. They said that the representation must be equitable. I think it is important because there must exist an opinion of both sexes to guarantee a real representation. It was a decision taken in consensus. Franco Viteri, is a man that always defend the rights of women, and is always talking about equity, he is always in favor of women's leaderships. (Gualinga S. , 2022)

Women's leadership and the gender equality agenda

The Sarayaku women have a long history of resistance against the big economic actors that have had the intention to enter their territories. Their roles as activists in the defense and protection of natural resources has been the central issue in the agenda of indigenous communities. As it has been stated in previous lines, the defense of the Sarayaku territory, and nature, was the trigger for women's initiation in the politics of the community. The empowerment process that led them to occupy positions of influence in the community government started right there, in the resistance, and rebellious acts against powerful forces. Because the defense of the territory is fundamental for indigenous people survival, it still remains as the central topic of the indigenous people agenda.

However, with the influence of feminism, indigenous women from Sarayaku are also incorporating the gender equality agenda to their own projects. Women leaders who work in the community government have a key position to incorporate gender issues in the decision-making process.

In the last years, there has been an emphasis in gender equality, and

women's rights, More and more men are involved in these issues. There are workshops regarding gender-based violence, and couples participate in them. Some things have changed, but some other gender norms are rooted in the traditions of the community and are hard to unlearn. Sarayaku not only thinks of defending its territory, the stability of the people is also important (...) the basic needs must be fulfilled, we have to reach a level of harmony (...) tayjasaruta is in charge of the wellness policies of the community too. (Gualinga S. , 2022)

However, women are reluctant to call themselves feminist. They consider it to be a political discourse that can cause conflict between men and women.

In Sarayaku we avoid using words such as feminism or chauvinism because that can cause rivalry between men and women. In Sarayaku, men and women have roles that complement each other, of course there are situations that break with the harmony of the community, but we cannot say that everything is sexism. (Gualinga S. , 2022)

Culture is a determinant factor when analyzing the gender division of labor. One branch of the gender research field tackles on the nature of gender relations of power in the context of indigenous communities. Does the gender division of labor work as system of subordination, or complementarity? Those who adhere to the complementarity thesis argue that some indigenous societies are structured on the basis of a dual organization which assigns a complementary status to both men and women. Therefore, the gender division of labor do not necessarily imply gender unequal relations in indigenous societies. In this line of thought, it is argued that the

process of transculturation, and modernization has influenced the loss of complementarity, influencing the transition towards a system of gender subordination (Isbell 1975; Harris 1985; Anderson 1990; Sánchez-Parga 1990 cited

There is complementarity, but the burden for women is bigger. When a man is a leader, he can dedicate his time completely to the leadership responsibilities without worrying about the household chores. However, when if a woman is the leader, she is also a mother and a wife, she has to manage to do both things. (Gualinga S. , 2022)

It is clear that women's conception of gender roles must be interpreted from a cultural point of view. However, how is it possible to recognize the difference between complementarity without falling on gender essentialist conclusions? Women recognize that having gender differentiated tasks is not always negative, and is indeed part of their culture. However, they also argue that some other cannot be justified under the cultural argument. Women are experiencing a dichotomy in regards to the gender structure of their communities, which in some sense is influenced by the gender equality agenda. This is an interesting topic for further research.

Women in informal politics: activists or human land defenders?

The process of empowerment is a dynamic process, it is in constant change. Indigenous women from Sarayaku started this process in the informal politics of the community, gathering, and creating groups of resistance that position them in the public arena, that eventually led them to occupy positions of leadership in the

community. However, that does not mean that collective action is mainly instrumental, secondary, or less important than being a leader in the community government. Actually, the concept of leadership is not restrained to formal politics. In Spanish, the word "leader" is generically used to name the people who act on behalf of the community interest, whether this is someone with an official position in the community government, a leader that incentivizes collective action, or someone who promotes the Sarayaku cause in the national and international level.

During the interview I used the term *activist* to name the women who are involved in the informal politics, that takes part in direct action such as public protests, or any type of public activity that consists of efforts to promote a cause of public interest. However, the Sarayaku women do not consider themselves as activist and prefer the term *human rights and land defenders*. Even though both terms are closely related, for indigenous women activism is an activity done from the people outside the territory.

In Sarayaku we don't feel like we are activist because we defend something that is ours, we defend our life and our territory, we are not activist, but land defenders. It is also important to note that each person has a role in the defense, the ones that stay in the territory work for the wellbeing of the people, and the ones that are defending us outside as activist are the one who give the voice to Sarayaku, because the ones that live here do not have time to do so. (Gualinga S. , 2022)

It is noteworthy the outstanding presence of the community of Sarayaku in the international arena. Since the nineties, Sarayaku understood the relevance of the

transnational advocacy networks (Keck, Margaret, & Sikkink, 1999) In this sense, the transnational action was used as a tool to make visible the human right violations perpetrated by the state against indigenous people, with the purpose of stopping extractivist policies, and more recently, influence in the political debate of climate change. Interestingly, the women from Sarayaku are the one that represent the community in the international level. Why is the case?

There is a new tendency of the empowered women. You get more support when women are doing these kinds of activities, because it does not have the same impact when a man does it. We are living a moment where women are the faces in the international arena. (Gualinga S. , 2022)

Therefore, the presence of young women in the international scene is part of the political international strategy of Sarayaku. This in response to the international demands of including women in the public affairs. Helena and Nina Gualinga are the most popular faces of Sarayaku in the international scene of politics, they attend to global forums of climate change, and do interviews in different settings. Women from Sarayaku are important political actors in the public sphere, their amazing capabilities to speak in public and transmit the message of the Sarayaku people, have propitiated that the global community put attention to the Sarayaku people, and their demands for climate justice, and indigenous people's rights.

CHAPTER 5

Conclusions

Two historical moments in the history of the people from Sarayaku marked a before and after for women during their participation in the community conflict in 1992 and 2003-2004, and later during the years that the international legal battle lasted until 2012. Women were more and more visible in the political sphere at the community level, but also at the national and international levels. The defense of their territories, and the active participation in protests, collective movements, forums, and so on, contributed to the process of their political empowerment as they acquired important skills to stand out for the interest of the community, and without knowing, for their interest as women too. Their political empowerment was a reciprocal process between them and the community, they demonstrated their capacities of leadership, and with that, they transformed the gender norms that exclude them from community politics. In return, the community trusted them and started to nominate them for community government positions.

The community not only recognizes the ability of women to hold positions in the communist government but also encourages them through the traditional system for the nomination of authorities. The involvement of Sarayaku women in the politics of their communities, whether they act as defenders of their lands, or have occupied a position of power within the community government, has taken place because of social and political transformations at the individual, relational, and community levels. However, the political participation of women is not free from the judgment of the community. Even though the access of women to the public sphere is a reality,

their roles as mothers and wives have remained the same. Therefore, women who occupy positions of leadership face a double burden of non-paid work, considering that leadership positions are not remunerated jobs. An apparent consequence of this is the decrease in women's decision to accept leadership nominations. Within this social context, women are still rediscovering themselves individually, and collectively. The cultural discourse of gender roles complementarity is deconstructing among the younger generations of indigenous women, and the line that divides complementarity of genders, and unjustified segregation is getting less blurry.

There are some other factors that influence women's decisions to accept leadership. First family lineage is a determinant factor in the decision of those women who belong to a well-reputed family. However, this does not exclude women with other family members to be nominated by the community government. Nonetheless, the pressure factor does play a role in the decision of women who belong to families with leadership lineage.

Men and women leaders are held accountable for their performance. Every six months, the community government calls all the members of the community to a general assembly in which the leaders inform the fulfillment of their work plans. In terms of the expected results, the community does not have bigger expectations from the women's leadership results in comparison to men. As long as the leaders do their job, the community will be satisfied with the leader. However, there is a differentiated reaction from the community when a women leader has not fulfilled their tasks. While men are judged individually for their actions, women are judged collectively, meaning that the community judgment will judge women as a collective.

The types of leadership that women are nominated and chosen to occupy are generally linked to their traditional roles as caregivers. The same happens to the leaders that men are in charge of. This tendency shows that even though women have access to political power, there is still a strong system of social norms that attached them to the roles of caregivers, and educators.

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초록

지역 사회 수준에서 선주민 여성의 정치 참여: 사라야쿠-에콰도르 키츠와족 사례

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삶의 모든 영역에서 여성의 참여와 대표권은 개발의 대리인이자 수혜자로서의 역할을 완전히 실현하는 데 필수적이다. 그러나 정치에서 여성을 대표하고 여성에게 권한을 부여하려는 노력은 종종 국가 수준에 집중되는 경향이 있다. 에콰도르에서 선주민의 자치권은 헌법에 의해서 인정되며, 이에 따라 대안적인 정부구조 속에서 성별과 권력의 역학관계가 이뤄질 수 있다. 이 연구에서는 공동체 차원의 토착적 자치 구조 내에서 선주민 여성의 정치 참여 상황은 어떠한가를 탐구하고자 한다. 에콰도르 아마존에 위치한 선주민 공동체인 사라야쿠(Sarayaku)의 키치와(Kichwa)족의 사례를 통해 여성이 지역 사회 차원의 자치정부에서 권력을 향유할 수 있었던 요인을 분석한다.