



The Motivations of Witoto Women to Become a Leader, Their Vision on Women Reinforcement and How Allies Can Support Them

Witoto Indigenous women, leadership and women reinforcement

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Abstract

ENGLISH

This research is based mainly on the experiences of female Indigenous Witoto leaders from the Amazon forest in Colombia. For this purpose, I conducted an ethnographic fieldwork study during the months of February, March and April in 2022. By capturing these women's views on female leadership, territorial struggles and female empowerment, I aim to contribute to the decolonisation of the relationship between women leaders and their allies. For this purpose, I also integrated the vision of the socio-ecological NGO 'Proterra' that was the first to use a gender approach in working with this community.

Keywords: Indigenous female leaders, Territorial struggles and women rights, Witoto women, Witoto leadership, Amazon forest Colombia. Indigenous ontologies.

DUTCH

Dit onderzoek baseert zich voornamelijk op de ervaringen van vrouwelijke Inheemse Witoto leiders afkomstig uit het Amazonewoud in Colombia. Hiervoor verrichtte ik een etnografisch veldwerkonderzoek tijdens de maanden februari, maart en april in 2022. Door de visie van deze vrouwen omtrent vrouwelijk leiderschap, de territoriale strijd en vrouwelijke versterking in beeld te brengen, tracht ik bij te dragen aan de dekolonisatie van de relatie tussen vrouwelijke leiders en hun bondgenoten. Daarnaast integreerde ik ook de visie van de socio-ecologische NGO 'Proterra' die als eerste een genderbenadering hanteerde in de samenwerking met deze gemeenschap.

Sleutelwoorden: Inheemse vrouwelijke leiders, Territoriale strijd en vrouwenrechten, Witoto-vrouwen, Witoto-leiderschap, Amazonewoud Colombia. Inheemse ontologieën.

SPANISH

Esta investigación se basa principalmente en las experiencias de las líderes indígenas Witoto de la selva amazónica de Colombia. Para ello, realicé un estudio etnográfico de campo durante los meses de febrero, marzo y abril de 2022. Al representar los puntos de vista de estas mujeres sobre el liderazgo femenino, las luchas territoriales y el empoderamiento femenino, pretendo contribuir a la descolonización de la relación entre las mujeres líderes y sus aliados. Para ello, también integré la visión de la ONG socioecológica "Proterra", que fue la primera en adoptar un enfoque de género en su trabajo con esta comunidad.

Palabras clave: Mujeres líderes indígenas, Luchas territoriales y derechos de las mujeres, Mujeres witoto, Liderazgo witoto, Selva amazónica Colombia. Ontologías indígenas.

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Abbreviations

ACT	Colombia- Amazon Conservation Team
ASCAINCA	Asociación de Cabildos Indígenas Uitoto del Alto Río Caquetá / Association of Uitoto Indigenous Councils of the Upper Caquetá River (regional)
COICA	Coordinadora de las Organizaciones Indígena de la Cuenca Amazónica / Coordinator of Indigenous Organizations of the Amazon River Basin (international: Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador, Colombia, Brazil, Venezuela, Suriname, French Guyana and Guyana)
ICFB	Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar / Colombian institute for family wellbeing
IPs	Indigenous peoples
ONIC	Organización Nacional Indígena de Colombia / National Indigenous Organization of Colombia
OPIAC	Organización Nacional de los Pueblos Indígenas de la Amazonía / Organization of Indigenous Peoples of the Colombian Amazon
OWW	One World-World
TNC	The Nature Conservancy

Glossary of common terms

Abuelos	De grootouders die de traditionele autoriteit representeren.
ASCAINCA	The associated communities are 4 resguardos and 1 cabildo in the municipality of Solano: Manaye El Quince, Coropoya, Huitorá, Bajo Aguas Negras, and Ismuina, located in the basin of the Caquetá and Orteguzza rivers in the municipality of Solano, department of Caquetá, covering a total of 90,082 hectares.
Cacique	Community leader.
Cassave	It is a pancake made from yucca flour and may be the oldest way to eat yucca.
Cauchería	The era of rubber exploitation in the Amazon (19 th – 20 th century).
Chagra	Field for cultivation.
ONIC	Biedt ondersteuning aan zo'n 50 organisaties die werken rond inheemse rechten op zonaal en regionaal niveau.
Resguardo	Beschermd Inheems territorium.
Witoto, Uitoto	
Huitoto, Murui Muina	Refereren naar dezelfde Inheemse etniciteit.
OPIAC	Representeren alle inheemse gemeenschappen in het Amazone van Colombia.

PART I. Introduction

1.1 Introduction

Since the beginning of colonization, Indigenous peoples have constituted resistance to exploitation, illegal appropriation of land and other forms of institutionalized discrimination (Jackson, 2007: 205). This process is still going on as a form of neo-colonization through the imposition of various neo-liberal structural adjustment programmes, commissioned by funding organizations such as the World Bank, the IMF and the Inter-American Development Bank, affecting the poor the most. The purpose of these free trade agreements is to increase foreign investment. This creates a fear among Colombian (Indigenous) village leaders of losing their territory to large companies (Murillo, 2006). Colombia has the highest number of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in the world and is followed by Syria with 6.7 million IDPs and 5.2 million IDPS in the Republic of Congo. According to United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2021) approximately 8.3 million Colombian citizens left their original territory and moved to cities and informal settlements. This internal conflict is called ‘the forced urbanisation of the country’ (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2020). Their territories are taken away not only for foreign investment in the cattle and mining industries, but also as instruments of power for the paramilitary and guerrilla groups. The land provides them with economic profit through speculation and coca production (Morales-Muñoz, 2021).

There is an estimation of 1,500,000 IPs which counts for 3.4 per cent of the total population of Colombia. In 2007, the Colombian government adopted the UN Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. However, in 1991, the Political Constitution already recognized the fundamental rights of Indigenous Peoples by the ratification of ILO Convention 169. In 2014, president Santos, signed a decree that operationalized a special regime for IPs to create their own administrative systems to exercise sovereignty over their territories. The Organic Law of Territorial Management establishes the relationship and coordination between these Indigenous Territorial Entities and the Municipalities and Departments (IWGIA, 2022). According to Herrera Nemerayema & Duarte (2020), the Indigenous people in Colombia have certainly made progress in different scenarios of cultural resistance and autonomy. These debates take place in

round tables and commissions around human rights, Indigenous education and Indigenous struggles around territoriality and health. As a result, public policy-making with and for IPs has increased. However, the participation of Indigenous women of the Amazon in these decision-making processes is still very limited. In order to promote this process, several initiatives emerged. First, the elaboration of the Programme for the Protection of the Rights of Indigenous Women of the Amazon who are victims of displacement and armed conflict, as mandated by the Colombian Constitutional Court through Auto 092 of 2008. This process allowed the Indigenous women of the Amazon to question the authorities and institutions dealing with this issue about the internal and external conditions that limit their right to participate (Herrera Nemerayema & Duarte, 2020). Second, the Political Training School of the National Organisation of Indigenous Peoples of the Colombian Amazon (OPIAC). Amazonian women prioritised and demanded that the Colombian state guarantee the right to participation of Amazonian Indigenous women through various initiatives (OPIAC, 2013).

During my stay in Solano, an Amazonian village that is connected to a Witoto community in Colombia, I got to learn about the Witoto woman and her territorial struggle.

The Witoto woman has great symbolic value for the territory. In the following quote, Ninfa Herrera, an inspirational Witoto leader currently working for the National Institute for Family Welfare (ICBF), describes what it means to be a Witoto woman.

“The woman for me is the source of life, is the fundamental pillar of a society, of a culture in this case, so that it continues in the future, yes? Because it is the woman who gives life, she is the one who cultivates that life or that seed, and not only in terms of children, but she also takes care of the seed of life, of food, of knowledge, because the woman is the one who has that first relationship with her child, and that is where a whole people is founded.¹” (Personal communication. 02.04.2022).

¹ See annex 6.1 for the original transcription

The increasing participation in the territorial struggle provides a new role for the Witoto woman both inside and outside the community. This research will discuss the motivations of these women, the interpretation of this female leadership and the external influences through their alliances.

1.2 Research question

The development of capitalism in the Colombian Amazon created a series of environmental, social and cultural transformations in the region, affecting the Indigenous communities that inhabit this territory. Changes in land use, the expansion of the agricultural frontier and increasing deforestation are some of the most relevant problems for Indigenous Amazonian people. This process has not only endangered the biodiversity of the area and the state of the forests that characterize it, but it also negatively affects practices related to traditional forms of cultivation, Indigenous cultural identity and the food security and sovereignty (ASCAINCA, 2020).

Indigenous movements have been important in the recognition of the rights and demands of the peoples they represent, and in the generation and expansion of political spaces in local, national and international contexts. However, there is very little discussion of the role of Indigenous women in these processes and the political dynamics they have generated in these spaces (Nemerayema & Duarte, 2020; Méndez, 2009; Odimba, 2017; Lux, 2011; Lavinias, 2018). This research collaborated with 4 Indigenous Witoto resguardos and 1 Indigenous cabildo. These 5 Witoto communities are united as an Indigenous movement called ASCAINCA². Since 2002, a department for the coordination of Women, Family and Children (ASCAINCA, 2020) has existed here. This formation wants to strengthen the processes and rights of the Indigenous Witoto women of ASCAINCA in an integral way and give the women direct participation and leadership in the different processes and projects of the organisation. Their main focus is the strengthening of these cultural aspects where women are mostly represented such as the food sovereignty, the native language, education and handicrafts. However, individual rights to protect sexual and domestic violence are almost not addressed (Nemerayema & Duarte, 2020).

Although women's oppression existed in many Indigenous communities before western colonization, it was significantly increased during colonisation (Monaiyanhö, 2018). The advocacy of gender equality in Southern countries is therefore seen by critics as another intrusion by the West, which profiles itself as superior because of its feminist morality (Ulloa,

² See chapter 3.4.6 and appendix 4 for more details

2019). Examining women's emancipation in Indigenous communities from a white perspective therefore requires a decolonial perspective and leads me to the following reflections. What are the motivations, political interests and challenges of Indigenous female leaders? What rethinking has been offered by the various collective proposals of IPs or by Indigenous women on such categories as female leadership and women reinforcement? How have notions of gender, feminism, and gender equality been rethought? What are the daily and intimate practices of participation and decision making, and how do Indigenous women construct, for themselves and on a multiscale, the spaces for political participation? What are the implications of the global gender debate on the genderperspective of Indigenous leaders, enacted by their allies, and how does that respond to other cultural notions? Is the establishment of gender equality in Indigenous communities a form of neo-colonization or can it also be done in a decolonizing way?

Despite the growing literature on territorial dispossession processes, gender dimensions within these processes are still a marginal topic (Berman-Arévalo & Ojeda, 2020). This research is based on the motivations of Indigenous Witoto women who are considered as leaders. We delve into the motivations of these women to engage as leaders and their vision of women reinforcement. Later, it also zooms in on the strategies of their socio-environmental allies, working with a gender approach, to support this process and how these strategies were decolonised or not. Decolonization as an ongoing process, must be deliberately (re)enacted and involves both material and symbolic decolonization (Cusicanqui, 2012). According to Rose-Redwood (2016) it is counterproductive to speak of material and symbolic as two separate things in Indigenous ontology. The territory and its relationship with the Indigenous cosmovision are inherently connected. The aim of decolonization is to end settler colonial structures by redistributing wealth and by returning and restoring land. This must be done with respect for the Indigenous understandings (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Hence, there is certainly ambiguity around true decolonization based on Indigenous understandings. How does decolonization look like when gender violence occurs within Indigenous communities? I argue that decolonization can only happen when Indigenous women are represented and heard as much as Indigenous men. Indigenous visions are plural and therefore contain a co-existence of multiple worlds (Escobar, 2017). Concepts such as leadership and reinforcement are also implemented by women in a multi-dimensional way (see part 3.5.2). In order to achieve this

political participation and be effectively heard outside their communities, Indigenous communities are forced to adopt western legal concepts (Castillo, 2017) such as ‘environment’ and ‘justice’ (Álvarez & Coolsaet, 2020).

Decolonization can therefore only take place when legal and western frameworks also adapt their language to the pluriverse ontology that characterizes Indigenous groups.

1.3 Positionality as researcher

This research is based on ethnographic fieldwork. My working method is explained in more detail in Part 3. First, I want to try to decolonize my own position as a researcher in a non-European context as much as possible. I want to do this by collecting information from a standpoint-epistemology. Sandra Harding (2004) was the first one who coined the term standpoint-theory. It is a feminist epistemology that stems from the central feminist concept of "situated knowledge", which means knowledge that reflects the specific perspective of the informant. This feminist approach appeared as a critique on the dominant knowledge practices that disadvantage women and limits the academic world due to the narrow view of objectivity. The standpoint-approach argues that knowledge always is socially situated. It has its roots in the Marxist thought that people from a privileged class are not able to understand the situation of the oppressed. This perspective denies the objectivity of traditional knowledge based on the reality of white men (Harding, 2004). Indigenous women have participated in their peoples' struggles for decades but in the political context of international, national and local relations, the participation of male organisations or representatives is privileged. This corresponds to ways of seeing the political, which often ignore or do not value other ways of understanding it. It is understood through the kind of manifestations that are considered political (marches, confrontations, court cases, strategic litigation, etc.), which do not include intimate or personal actions. Thus, conceptual and methodological problems have arisen to explain other types of political action. In this sense, this axis aims to highlight the methodological strategies that have guided Indigenous women in processes of participation and visibility of their demands, making visible other narratives, knowledge and pedagogies, as well as ways of producing poems, graphic narratives or theatre as other ways of doing politics, proposed by Indigenous women (Hermosilla, 2020).

Harding (2004) created an epistemology that emphasizes women's knowledge since women and women thought are often marginalized. Social structures as gender, class and race defines a person's social position and therefore determines what a person can know. People at the top of social hierarchies often ignore real human relationships and the true nature of social reality. In contrast, the unique point of view of people at the bottom provide a better way to define important research questions and explain social and natural problems. Therefore, I sought a research question from the field itself. In addition, my theorizing is mainly based on what these

female leaders told me. A minor part comes from the information I received through collaboration with one of their closest allies. The perspective of this NGO is therefore also highlighted. Although the research theme was decided after contact with actors in the field, I collected my data in an inductive way. In this manner, the research was a constant process of coming across perspectives that I had not previously considered. In this manner, I specified the research question.

Ethnographic fieldwork research has emerged from the need to understand the worldview and lifestyle of real people in the context of their everyday lived experiences (Crang & Cook, 2007). The literature often refers to the research subjects as informants. In contrast, I rather agree with Crang & Cook (2007) who speak of intersubjective views. According to them it is not possible to separate the subject from the object. Therefore, as a researcher, it is important to become aware of your own positionality, not only of how you are 'immersed' in the community of study but also how you are immersed in outside communities both as a researcher and as a research object. The boundaries between work and academic field are blurred during most participatory observations so the academic background of the researcher is influencing the views in the work field and vice versa (2007: 40). Despite my methodology based on the standpoint-theory, I agree that I can never fully understand this point of view. After all, I grew up in a privileged white middle-class position. Although living an ecologically and politically conscious life, I can never fully free myself of my own biases. Furthermore, the language aspect creates a next obstacle to reaching a valid shared understanding. According to Marisol de la Cadena (2015), 'translation' does not lead to knowing. Translating, learning a language or even a common lingua franca can increase understanding. Yet abstract layers present alongside words and actions provide a dimension that cannot be captured in words. In both descriptions and observations, many aspects are lost or reduced to a (cross-cultural) translation. "My world was included in the world that my friends inhabited and vice versa, but their world could not be reduced to mine, or mine to theirs" (De la Cadena, 2015:4).

The ontological relationship between the Witoto women and the dominant West will also inevitably be discussed in this thesis. In this way, I hope to be able to contribute to the post-development idea of 'pluriverse', coined by the Colombian Arturo Escobar (2017). According to the Zapatista movement, a pluriverse is "a world in which many worlds fit". It starts from a

non-dualistic way of thinking in which the boundaries between nature and culture and between human and non-human are erased (Escobar, 2017). It goes against the 'one-world world model' (OWW) and seeks to preserve multiple worlds (Law, 2011). This struggle is an important subject of political ontology and often refers to the struggle of marginalized groups such as IPs to maintain their territories. It is one with the same struggle to preserve the commons and combat land-grabbing. It thus seeks to counteract the privatizing nature of global capitalism.

Yet political ontologies go far beyond this territorial struggle and can also be found within the same world, as illustrated above by a quote from Marisol de la Cadena (2015). These differences are inherent in the pluriverse approach, so it remains a challenge to understand the meaning of different worlds and to respect their existence, especially for those who come from the OWW. The results of this thesis will ultimately be a synthesis of etic (outsider perspective, the researcher) about the emic (insider perspective, the participants) knowledge (Yilmaz 2013: 315). Since I cannot completely distance myself from my own biases, this outsider perspective is influenced by the racial, (neo)colonial and anthropocentric structures that influence the Western world in which I grew up. Therefore, I agree with Escobar (2017) that OWW knowledge always contains a certain coloniality and we as researchers should strive for an academic world where there is space for a much larger collective of humans and non-humans and learn from 'non-academic' fields such as Spiritual Ecology.

To approach my research question(s) and to make the political actions of the Indigenous Witoto women visible, a significant number of my sources were written by Indigenous women. My practical research is also primarily based on the experiences of Witoto female leaders and partly on those of NGO 'Proterra' which support these women in the process of reinforcement. The participants of this research perform leadership at different levels and in different fields. The word 'leader' is also interpreted different than in the dominant western view (see 3.5.2). In other words, various ontologies and epistemologies were brought into dialogue based on Indigenous women local histories and experiences but also considering the reformulations based on feminist epistemologies. The premise remains the knowledge of Indigenous women, their experiences, and their own perceptions of what is and what is not Witoto female leadership.

1.4 Dissertation structure

To understand Indigenous issues, it is important to first answer some ontological questions. In the theoretical framework, the questions of Indigeneity, Indigenous ontology, territory, intersectionality, Indigenous women and politics and Indigenous feminisms, are addressed. This section forms the basis for the empirical part, discussed in chapter 3. Chapter 3 contains a description of my ethnographic field methodology, followed by the situating of some Witoto territories and an introduction to Witoto culture. This is far from complete, due to my limitations as a short-term external researcher, which meant that a true understanding was beyond my means. Because of the focus on gender, some traditional customs will be related to the genderstructures within the communities.

Next, we will elaborate on the research question. What are the motivations of Witoto women to become a leader, what is their vision on women reinforcement and how can allies support them. This is done first by contextualising the history of the Witoto women. Next, I discuss the female Witoto meaning of the word 'leader'. We then look at the women's motivations for committing to leadership, their political interests and the challenges of the position. To conclude, I will discuss different strategies of female reinforcement. These are strategies that arose from the community itself or through cooperation with the socio-environmental justice ally, Proterra. Each time a reflection is made on the mutual influence of dominant discourses on traditional visions.

PART II. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Conceptual discussion

2.1.1 What is Indigeneity?

On the one hand, Indigenous peoples represent a non-Western culture and nature and, on the other, they are subjects of issues of modernity and coloniality (Radcliffe, 2015). I will describe the word 'Indigenous' below in terms of two principle categories by which indigeneity is measured: the 'modern category' and the 'place-based category'.

I will respectfully refer to Indigenous with a capital letter. The word Indigeneity implies to be 'Indigenous' and means 'to be of a place'. Approaches to Indigeneity usually start from place-based descriptions. Yet all Indigenous identities are dynamic, multiple and context-bound because of time and place (Alfred & Corntassel 2005). Modern attitudes tend to frame identities within certain categories instead of recognizing their fluidity (Alfred & Corntassel 2005). This is in function of maintaining racial hierarchies and control. The modern interpretation of what constitutes an Indigenous identity also changes over time. Depending on certain identity markers, the government can grant autonomous rights to Indigenous peoples. Peoples who want to claim these rights will also often use their culture as a tool and represent them as Indigenous in a certain way based on social expectations (Cowan, 2006; Jackson, 2007). Indigeneity is after all a construct and therefore has no inherent characteristics. By categorising 'Indigenous' peoples as 'subhuman', their exploitation, as the foundation of capitalism, was thus justified. By judging this category as pre-modern, it conceals the fact that it is a modern category born out of colonial thinking. After all, the word 'traditional' would not exist without the modern (Hirtz, 2003). This reasoning also follows Fanon's reflection on 'Blackness' because you are only "black in relation to the white man" (2008:83). It is the gaze of the white man that reduces to ethnicity or skin colour. This can have far-reaching consequences for the self-perception of these peoples who internalize a sense of minority or distance themselves from their own beliefs and traditions.

The second perspective argues that Indigeneity is not only determined by the relationship with a dominant group. IPs do not need to have had a colonial past to be designated as Indigenous (Alfred & Corntassel, 2005). According to this 'place-based category', kinships and connection to ancestral territories - 'land-rootedness' - are primary indicators for determining Indigenous identities. Although the origin of many Indigenous peoples is in the territory, we cannot essentialize this fact. Many peoples were forced to migrate, so that connection to the ancestral territories is not always easy to determine. The possibility of living their traditional way of life is therefore highly dependent on land titles and control over resources (Lâm, 2004). This statement applies to both Indigenous peoples in North America and South America. Racial reasoning makes these peoples vulnerable to this day and legitimizes land expropriation (Rasmussen & Lund, 2018).

2.1.2 *Indigenous ontologies*

There are many Witoto communities, which makes it difficult to make generalizations about the population. This research focuses specifically on the Witoto people living and/or gathering in the Cabildo near the municipal 'Solano' in Caquetá. Despite numerous local differences between Indigenous villages, there is a fundamental ontological difference between the Indigenous vision and the dominant Western vision. Although the distinction between West and non-West is not absolute and views are constantly in transformation, Latour (2017) claims that the Indigenous ontology is embedded in a broader ecosystem and an undivided multidimensional world. The Western ontology defines humanity by separating it from nature and is therefore anthropocentric. This nature/culture division justifies the exploitation of natural resources as being a 'human right'. This view is contrary to the Indigenous pluriverse ontology because natural reality is much more complex than the Western dichotomous classification. According to the Indigenous view, there is a wide spectrum of views and worlds that are constantly changing (68).

This approach fits within the theory of pluriverse, coined by Arturo Escobar. The pluriverse is a world in which multiple post-development worldviews live together in harmony. Post-development theories look for alternatives to the dominant development discourse in order to reshape the world in a socially just and sustainable way. This critique of the development discourse that places humans above nature is increasing in academia as well as in Indigenous movements, women's rights movements, civil society movements and local communities. This type of thinking is most prevalent among the victims of the Western development model, including Indigenous women movements. It implies a decolonisation of knowledge and epistemologies and breaks the dualistic human/nature thinking of Western patriarchy. The best-known post-development movements are the Indigenous movement 'buen vivir', degrowth, ecological swaraj, commoning, food and energy sovereignty, *ubuntu*, solidarity economy, spiritual ecology and radical feminisms of various kinds.

Indigenous cosmovisions are fundamental to the post-development theory of Spiritual Ecology. This movement makes the connection between environmentalism and spiritualism. Ecology in this sense returns to the relationship between the living land and living beings (Suler 2020). This relationship is illustrated by the following quote from a Witoto woman, Martha Gómez, who studied anthropology and provided me with a reference book of her ethnographic research on her community's education system.

“The land, in general (...) is a sacred space, a factor of unity, a factor of autonomy, a source of joy, health and well-being and an essential component of their history (...) their relationship with the land is that of child with mother, clothed in respect and love. The earth is our sacred mother, because she guarantees our survival; it is where our ancestors lived and where we remain. It is the essence of our existence and without it we cannot speak of any culture, because from our Mother Earth comes all life, for her we must love her and respect her”³. (Gómez, 2007: 27).

³ See appendix 6.2 for original citation in Spanish.

This ontological difference between IPs and the dominant West, makes the political interaction between IPs and the broader capitalist institutions an interesting one. An expression that often recurred was "we live with one leg in the traditional world and the other one in the western world" (Environmental promotor. Personal communication. 25.03.2022). It is an ambiguous issue because on the one hand it is the western world that is taking away both the Indigenous culture and the territory through deforestation, cattle breeding, mining, etc. On the other hand, the communities must rely on Western resources such as the Spanish language, knowledge of the legal system, money, etc. to obtain justice (Castillo et al., 2017).

Indigenous villages and their allies are aware that the successful representation of Indigenous authority and authenticity is necessary for leaders to have the right to represent their village. These groups therefore try to preserve their culture not only because of the value they attach to it but also as a form of political autonomy. In this sense, culture becomes a political instrument in order to obtain, for instance, the right to own territory (Jackson, 2007: 231). But the cultural content of such representation must be considered 'acceptable'. Using several cases of Indigenous activism in Colombia, Jackson (2007) shows what can happen when the representation of these Indigenous groups is rejected. When social differences are too big in the eyes of the liberal dominant population, the minority groups run the risk of being more rejected. Cowan (2006) identifies this as the complex and contradictory consequences of rights being granted based on cultural identity (18). A case studies examined by Jackson (2007) reveals a dynamic process of appropriation, contestation and reformation of Western meanings, particularly that of 'culture'. Because culture can take on different meanings and roles, it can also resist Western ideologies and become a political instrument (see supra). These groups put pressure on conventional socio-cultural and political representations on the one hand and on the use of terms such as 'culture', 'population', 'rights' and other Western concepts like 'democracy' and 'citizen'. These terms force Indigenous groups to reshape their own concerns and identities for the wider public in order to make claims more easily known and gain support. Jackson (2007) then concludes that the concept of human rights, although often perceived as universal, is today seen by academics and activists as a product of Western cultural and intellectual history (232 - 233). This critique can equally be applied to the concept of 'gender equality'. The influence of the West is ensuring that gender roles within Indigenous communities are subject to change (De Marinis, 2017; Rousseau, 2011). This is not the first time the West has influenced

established gender norms within Indigenous communities (Grijalva, 2012; Lugonas, 2011). For example, colonization in the Amazon forest during the late 19th century - early 20th century had a major impact on gender systems within the Witoto community (Monaiyanhö, 2018). In the meantime, these dynamics have again changed dramatically. This had to do with internal dynamics (for example, the entry of women governors in local Indigenous government) as well as external influences (Herrera Nemerayema & Diyanira Duarte, 2020). This dynamic will be discussed more deeply in the next Chapter. By contextualizing gender systems, it is therefore important not to see these cultures as static entities but rather to recognize the relational dynamics between the different categories (Dozono, 2017).

On the contrary, the West is also appropriating Indigenous ontologies and integrating this into new forms of Western spiritualism (Rhee & Subedi, 2014). I argue that it is very important to remain humble about the understanding you have as a white person about these cosmologies and traditions. Through cultural appropriation we are once again taking away the right to culture and mixing their visions and practices with those of Western capitalism. I am thinking, for example, of the commercialisation of certain Indigenous medicinal plants. I do not intend to say that Western dualism cannot therefore learn from spiritual ecology or Indigenous cosmologies. The interconnectedness between man and nature can in fact be perceived in an infinite number of forms, and each one deserves a place in the pluriverse. In the Global North, too, there are various movements promoting this ontology, such as 'degrowth'. This post-development theory questions the OWW (characterised by economic growth) and is therefore also relevant for the Global South. It challenges the dominant growth model by proposing a democratically led redistributive downscaling of consumption and production to industrialised countries. The goal is to achieve a socially just world. The focus is not only on minimalization but also on the creation of alternative methods of production. The application of the degrowth model will reorganise the entire society through a new metabolism and alternative structures and functions, including new gender roles (Demaria & Kothari, 2017).

2.1.3 Territory

The term 'territory' was initially understood as an administrative term referring to the space dominated by each state. Later, it became a term adopted by Indigenous movements to claim self-government, emphasising that power over territories is emerging. According to many Indigenous and rural visions in Latin America, the territory is more than the area in which one lives, it is literally also the body in which one lives. The body is the first territory and here we can also locate conflicts that take place in the area in which we live. Conflicts are therefore related to both the habitat (the second territory) and the body (the first territory). This line of thought stems from ancestral knowledge which assumes that the body has a memory. We also connect through the body's senses. The territorial body⁴ is a method that tries to connect feminism, ecology, nature and territory in a holistic way and is now gaining audience in Europe as well. From here, collective strategies of defence are sought (Colectivo Miradas Críticas del Territorio desde el Feminismo, 2017).

In general, there are many different interpretations between Indigenous communities about what the territory is. In fact, there are countless interpretations because each person has their own unique viewpoint. This is the reason why I attempt to describe what Witoto women consider territory to be with the following three citations deriving from interviews with three Witoto women.

“For me, territory is a space where we as Indigenous people we can have a variety of things, generally such as health, food and so on, but it is also a territory where.... the territory is life, it is love, and it is culture I would say, because all Indigenous people see the territory in different ways, we the Witoto, through coca, tobacco and sweet cassava, we handle it differently to how others handle us, so for us it will always be very important because it is the house, the house of thought, the house of knowledge, the house of everything that we have as Indigenous people, the food, the hospital, and generally without it we would be nothing”⁵.
(Coordinator for women and family ASCAINCA Personal communication. 26.03.2022).

⁴ See appendix 5 for details of a territorial body workshop.

⁵ See appendix 6.3 for original citation in Spanish.

The territory is a place where many Indigenous people live in variety... in Ismuina itself, we have Indigenous varieties, the territory is something that gives us our identity as Indigenous people, and it is also the fundamental basis for the families because in the territory we grow our food, our medicines, our fruit... And that is also where we live, that is where we drink water, where we benefit from the open air that we have here. That is a difference, even though we are attached to the town it is different because being here in the community, here they cannot come and force us to do this, do that, pay this tax, no, they leave us because we are an Indigenous territory that has its own rules.”⁶ (Environmental coordinator. Personal communication. 25.03.2022).

“Defence of territory is everything. Because if we as human beings are part of a territory, we have to defend it, and in many cases we also feel that the territory defends us, because we are part of a territory and we... the territory is not part of us, but we are part of a territory, so for us as IPs I think that the territory is fundamental because it is our basis for life and our relationship and our spirituality.” (Ninfa Herrera. Personal communication. 02.04.2022).

In each citation, they refer to the interconnectedness between culture, identity or humanity and the territory as a whole. So, this Indigenous ontology that states that humanity is part of nature and not superior to it, is certainly present. It is not only IP who fight for the territory but also the territory that protects them by donating food, medicine, knowledge etc. But it is also emphasised that both between Indigenous groups and within 1 Indigenous ethnicity, there are different views. The Witoto's identify their culture with the plants: 'coca', 'tabacco' and 'sweet cassava' and this, among other characteristics, distinguishes them from other Indigenous ontologies. Another way in which the relationship between the Witotos and the territory differs is in the rules they make about the territory because of the land titles they have acquired. More on Witoto culture is covered in Chapter 3.4.

⁶ See appendix 6.4 for original citation in Spanish.

2.1.4 *Intersectional position of Indigenous Witoto women*

Intersectionality is a concept developed by Kimberly Crenshaw (1991) which frames the intersubjective categories of identity where women can locate themselves or can be located by others. Besides, it demonstrates how this intersection of categories is constituted by the wider political structures of patriarchal violence (1991: 1241). As Denis (2008) states it: "intersectional analysis involves the concurrent analyses of multiple, intersecting sources of subordination or oppression, and is based on the premise that the impact of a particular source of subordination may vary, depending on its combination with other potential sources of subordination (or of relative privilege)" (677). Intersectionality has its roots in various movements. From standpoint theory to black feminism, post-structuralism and post-colonialism (McCall, 2005; Denis, 2008). On the one hand, it criticizes the absence of recognition for marginalized groups such as 'women', 'workers', 'Afro-Colombians' etc. On the other hand, it abandons the idea that identity markers can be studied separately and then simply added up. It just provides an overarching and idiosyncratic view of the different identity markers and the forces of oppression and privilege that interact.

Indigenous women suffering from gender violence beside the political and structural violence that derives from their Indigeneity, reveals the intersectionality of their positions (Castillo et al., 2017: 254). Their Indigeneity comes along with a poverty rate 2.5 times higher than the average national poverty rate (Sánchez, 2020) It is a shared assumption that Indigenous women are among the most exploited and least recognized citizens in Latin American states. There is a high rate of illiteracy, maternal mortality, racism, transnational attacks on their environment, both domestic and state violence and exploitative labour (Rousseau, 2011). Although there are many differences in culture and living conditions between Indigenous groups, there are also many transnational similarities in the struggles of Indigenous women (Suzack et al., 2010). The women who participated in my research all have the identity markers 'Indigeneity' and 'female', influenced by a colonial history, in common. Therefore, this mobilized a transnational network of Indigenous women's movements. An additional characteristic, typical for Colombia, is the relatively recent displacement. Because of the internal conflict going on in Colombia, most of the IPs have already fled their territories. The women who participated in the research therefore lived in different territories (both rural and urban) and were often born in a different

territory. This means that each woman had a different story to tell and this group cannot be homogenized. Most of the women are members of the zonal Indigenous organisation ASCAINCA and thus perform their leadership roles from within the Amazonian forest communities of Caquetá. Two Witoto leaders live in Bogotá working for a government organisation (ONIC and ICFB⁷) and are therefore in a higher socio-economic position.

Feminist geographers focus on the place that bodies occupy in territories and therefore uses an intersectional perspective. They question space as a neutral place. Bodies are placed in the context of space, which leads one to look at the composition and social dominance structures of these spaces (Dalby, 1994). Spaces are therefore dependent on power relations and are the result of social inequalities, which rank not only people but also territories. Feminist geography is thus a transversal analytical category that links gender and geography. This perspective is also gaining traction in Colombia's universities (Ulloa, 2019). Feminist geographers claim that power has a geography that generates inequality between people and places. They claim that bodies are the first boundary between self and other. They show how everything we do is spatially situated and different bodies are ordered by gender. Bodies that are then based on cultural constructions, on the idea of a space, a place, a community and a context (Dalby, 1994). Geographical places in Colombia are often characterised by processes of (neo)extractivism, regulation by paramilitary groups, guerilla and narco-traffickers. This creates great pressure on local people's access to both public and private spaces. For example, paramilitary control of the palm oil industry in the Caribbean coast, results in explicit spatial restrictions, night curfews, unwanted encounters with armed groups, fences, surveillance, requisitioning of both private and public spaces, and so on. The effects are particularly negative for women. They end up in the lowest paid jobs within the palm oil harvest or move to urban areas where they work in domestic jobs or as sex workers (Berman-Arévalo & Ojeda, 2020: 1592).

Restrictions on mobility reduce women's participation in the economy and their bodies increasingly become part of the household. Not only does participation in productive and reproductive labour decline due to the confiscation of water and land parcels, but the spaces for gendered sociability and knowledge exchange also disappear as a result. In other words, there

⁷ See infra 'abbreviation's.

is less opportunity to come together in mutual support and solidarity (Berman-Arévalo & Ojeda, 2020: 1592).

It is therefore interesting to note how different identity markers such as Indigeneity and geography enter into dialogue with gender and thus bring about forms of oppression and privilege. This intersectional view of identity is the common basis throughout this dissertation.

2.1.5 *The rise of Indigenous women in politics*

To understand Indigenous women's demands for rights and political claims we should firstly look to the historical dimension that situates the processes culturally and takes colonial dynamics into account. Secondly, it requires a perspective that accounts for political and gender participation as a process that occurs in step with reading of current visions of what is understood by the political. During colonial and precolonial contexts gender debates did not take place not only because the inequalities between women and men were not raised, but because they responded to other ontological categories and visions of being Indigenous and of being men and women (Gargallo, 2007 & Segato, 2011).

During the 1970s, the political dynamics of Indigenous people in terms of social movements and collective identities, began to be more documented. The different manifestations of both Indigenous men and women were mostly ignored due to the collective cultural identity approach. Since the 1970s, Indigenous movements have achieved political results and recognition of their rights through their demands, which have been accompanied by the recovery of land and part of their ancestral territory; the recognition of civil and ethnic rights; the generation of their own economic strategies and the conquest of political spaces by Indigenous leaders; the acceptance of their struggles by non-Indigenous sectors; the construction of multicultural, pluriethnic and/or plurinational states; the demand for new spaces for participation; and the creation of national, international and global negotiation spaces. These processes of rights recognition have confronted the modern categories of development and nature and, not so directly, also the categories of gender, and have done so by specifically

consolidating national and international spaces for discussion of Indigenous women's issues. Although Indigenous movements in Latin America have not taken a generalised stance on gender relations and differences, women's participation has been fundamental to them, although many analyses do not consider it in a differentiated way.

As Varese (1996) argues, some of the studies on Indigenous movements tend to focus on certain actions when they are the focus of interest of the academy itself. This tendency reflects a reductionist or Eurocentric perspective that only finds relevant political actions in the Indigenous movement when it recognises behaviours or actions that the academy considers political. Research into the testimonies of Indigenous Witoto women with a history of slavery during the rubber exploitation in La Chorrera, Caquetá, clearly reveals how fierce the resistance of Indigenous women was even then ((Monaiyanhö, 2018). As for the presence of Indigenous women, one might think that it is only in recent times that their participation has been highlighted, when feminist studies have begun to take an interest in them.

2.1.6 *Indigenous feminisms*

In Latin America there are currently around 45 million people belonging to 826 Indigenous groups (ECLAC, 2014). Given the cultural and historical diversity, talking about feminisms and gender in Indigenous contexts is not so clear, and it is difficult to generalise. However, there are transversal debates recognized by the Indigenous feminist movement. Likewise, in various contexts, both in Indigenous organisations and as individuals, there are Indigenous women who take an opinion in relation to the category of gender and feminisms, which constitutes a contemporary trend in South America. This positioning raises other ways of demanding political participation both within their communities and in local, regional and national political arenas.

Regardless of the approaches towards the understanding of the relationship between Indigenous movements, Indigenous women, feminisms and gender, it is necessary to be clear that they are leading dynamics through which they are demanding political participation. These demands are related to national and transnational political processes of recognition of cultural and gender

differences, as well as environmental and territorial recognitions that have allowed the emergence of a political arena. The aim is to rethink both the relationships between cultural rights and women's rights, and the differences and inequalities within IPs, who have been seen as homogenous (Ulloa, 2020). Indigenous women's movements are characterised by the fact that they stand up for territorial rights in the interests of the commonwealth (Rousseau, 2011). In doing so, they align themselves with the male-dominated Indigenous resistance movements. Besides, they also criticise patriarchal practices and norms within their communities. Indigenous women are often seen as key figures in the preservation of their culture. They are the anchor of the family. This is both a source of empowerment and identity-building for these women and also a potential and often real argument against women's full participation in social and political spheres (Radcliffe, 2008). Here one recognises the conflict between the preservation of culture and the emancipation of women that often characterises the struggle of Indigenous women. So there is certainly a contradiction since the advocacy of territorial rights by traditionally male-dominated Indigenous movements mainly seeks to protect customary practices. These customary practices do not always embrace Indigenous women's rights or aspirations (Sierra, 2007). Furthermore, 'women's emancipation' or the word 'feminism' is often criticised for its western connotations (Ulloa, 2020).

In Bolivia, a new constitution was implemented in 2009 with gender-specific claims. These claims were represented by both the feminist movement and the Indigenous women movement. Only through the interaction of both movements such a progressive constitution could be drafted with a perspective that took into account both the intersection between gender and ethnicity and Indigenous women's claims. This whole process later led to the massive emergence of Indigenous women's movements (Rousseau, 2011). In the community where I conducted my research, there was no women's network yet. The word 'feminism' was not used by most women in this community because of its western connotation. However, during the Proterra project 'las cultivadoras de la amazonia' [the Amazonian cultivators], efforts were made to strengthen and connect the women. The need to connect women was also strong within the community, but this process was sometimes hindered by traditional views.

An example of such a feminist network that connects the mission of Indigenous women with the territorial mission of other women is the feminist collective 'Colectivo Miradas Críticas del Territorio desde el Feminismo'. This transnational organisation connects women with a feminist

territorial mission across Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, México, Perú and Uruguay. They synthesised different international experiences using their own created feminist methodology, underpinned these experiences with literature and published a guide on the territorial body (*Miradas Críticas del Territorio desde el Feminismo*, 2017). According to them, the reason why these women are afflicted in Latin America and the Caribbean is: the global wave of racism, class and contempt towards Indigenous peoples. The neo-liberal and neo-extractivist dispossession particularly affects women and children (Perez-rincon et al., 2018). In addition, territorial militarisation ensures the misuse of female bodies as military objects and targets as well as currency (Monaiyanhö, 2018).

"Raising our voices against the inflicted bodily harm by corporations is important because it leaves the biggest traces in the memory of our bodies and emotions. They leave traces of pain because they break our community relationships, when they extract water, poison land or our spaces that we inhabit, they damage our bodies. Therefore, it is essential for us that when we talk about the damage that companies do in our territories, we also say that there are effects on our bodies" (Miradas Críticas del Territorio desde el Feminismo, 2017).

According to this women's movement, it is important to put the body at the centre because it helps us to feel free and happy. Thus, it is especially important for the body to fight for territory because one depends on it.

"So we believe that our struggle should start in the bodies of the people who are most dependent on the territory and often those people are women. But not to understand the body only as flesh and bones, but also with its spirit, with its fears, worries and happiness; that is, to understand the body as a political territory to defend" (Miradas Críticas del Territorio desde el Feminismo, 2017).

One of Ulloa's (2020) critique on the Indigenous feminist movement is that exclusions generated by the conceptions of the public versus the private associated with the masculine and the feminine, respectively, have been confronted by feminist movements from a non-Indigenous perspective when demanding women's participation in public spaces. These public

and private scenarios are assumed to be similar in Indigenous contexts, which is why public policies or institutional programmes encourage the participation of Indigenous women in these scenarios. These processes ignore the collective decision-making dynamics of IPs and impose divisions that did not previously exist. At the same time proposals of Indigenous women and Indigenous feminisms emerge as a counterproposal to these imposed categories. They rethink these feminist policy proposals that do not respond to their cultural dynamics in order to propose alternative processes, practices and concepts. The abovementioned methodology is an example of an alternative that has emerged from a grassroots Indigenous feminist movement.

PART III. Empirical Results

3.2 Methodology: Fieldwork

Through a friend I met last year in the Sierra Nevada of Colombia, I came into contact with the Colombian socio-environmental NGO 'Proterra'⁸, which cares for Indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities and the protection of ecosystems all over Colombia. Last year, together with the local Indigenous organization 'ASCAINCA', they started for the first time a project specifically for Indigenous women⁹. The intersection of being a displaced woman of an Indigenous ethnicity, belonging in the Amazon Forest, in a patriarchal country with corrupt socio-economic structures and where subsidies are practically non-existent, was until recently a distant event to me. In collaboration with 'Proterra', I conducted this research in an Indigenous community in Caquetá, Colombia. I examined the interaction between these Indigenous female leaders and the broader social, political, economic and cultural context using a gender-sensitive and decolonising approach.

This research is based on an ethnographic fieldwork study and therefore uses a qualitative approach. The data consists of notes from my participatory observations during the months February, March and April 2022, in combination with the transcripts of ten interviews. I conducted nine interviews with Indigenous Witoto women and one with Proterra. Besides, I had many informal conversations that provided me with relevant information. By means of a thematic analysis, I will contribute to the theorization of Witoto women's experience within politics and its effects on the broader context and vice versa. Ethnographic fieldwork will allow me to gain insight into the living environment of these women because this research method is based on one's own subjective experiences. This distinguishes it from the pure sciences in the sense that it is not completely objective. Therefore, there is a continuous dialogue with oneself as a researcher and critical self-reflection (Hoey, 2014). Everyday activities are seen within ethnographic fieldwork as the result of individuals interacting with the structures of 'culture'.

⁸ See appendix 1 for more details.

⁹ See appendix 2 for more details.

These structures are thus not seen as something separate from the everyday (Herbert, 2000). According to Crang & Cook (2007), ethnographic fieldwork does not start from a hypothesis which is subsequently tested in the field. What is collected beforehand is knowledge about what is interesting and relevant. Both the researcher and the participants are subject to several different worlds. The experience of these worlds is based on different self-identities. These identities are in turn colored, classified and gendered. Therefore, it is always significant to become aware of one's own history and the impact of categorisations as well as that of the subject (Crang & Cook, 2007). It is important to write down personal observations and impressions immediately, this is a form of primary research. Later, these findings are then processed into interpretations and become part of the secondary research (Hoey, 2014). The ethnographic fieldwork will mainly consist of participatory observation combined with some (in-depth) interviews. It also includes a literature study and a geo-data collection achieved through public sources.

After transcribing the interviews and digitalising my written notes, I inserted them in the data analysis software 'nVivo'. Using different coding schemes. I distinguished the most relevant themes as indicated by the participants¹⁰. These I eventually processed in the results section that follows. In addition, I also tried to briefly present the vision of their close alliance, Proterra. Transcripts of the interviews can be requested at the following email address: luca.v@hotmail.com. For my literature study, I mainly based myself on publications that arose from a collaboration between academics and Indigenous women. Astrid Ulloa, is a well-known anthropologist who is one of the few researchers that investigates the intersection between Indigeneity and gender within Colombia. Then I tried to incorporate as many publications as possible, written exclusively by IPs, to further decolonise my research. For example, I received one of the few remaining publications on Witoto culture from an anthropologist Martha Gómez within the cabildo Ismuina. I also had the honour of speaking with Clemencia Herrera, a renowned Witoto leader who also co-published with Astrid Ulloa. Likewise, she greatly enriched my literature study. Then I consulted the websites of various NGOs that worked with these groups. These were mainly Colombian NGOs (Proterra, TNC) or NGOs (ONIC, OPIAC) also working with Indigenous women. Their voice, vision and mission are also important in the

¹⁰ See appendix 3 for codebook.

debate. Due to many years of collaboration with the Indigenous communities, they are in my opinion an equally valuable source of information as academic sources that often contain a greater distance between the researcher and the community. For example, some researchers from the NGO 'TNC' live in the village next to the cabildo Ismuina in Solano. They live together with these communities in order to strengthen the communities and the ecosystem. Also, Proterra sometimes stays in one place for longer periods of time to conduct both workshops and research. Afterwards, they also return to these communities and establish strong ties between them over the years. In the meanwhile, Proterra and TNC joined forces to conduct workshops and research together. In this way, no double work is done, and the local communities do not have to engage in irrelevant projects. NGOs are thus often an important alliance of Indigenous communities. However, I argue this network has to be shaped in a decolonizing way, with an open and transparent communication towards the local communities, other NGOs and other stakeholders so cooperation can exist between all parties.

Another decolonisation strategy that I partially used is the 'participant-driven photo-elicitation method'. A method in which the photographs used in this dissertation were mainly taken by the participants themselves. This is a methodology that goes along with in-depth interviews and has, according to Van Auken, Frisvoll & Stewart (2010), four major advantages: photographs offer an insight into the implicit and often unconscious conceptions of representations, images and metaphors. It produces different and richer information, and it reduces the power, class and knowledge hierarchy between researcher and the researched community. Fourth, it strengthens the involvement of the participants in the research. To stay within the scope of this dissertation, this method is mainly relevant because of the last two advantages. It contributes to the process of decolonisation of academic research by increasing the participation of the researched group as much as possible (Van Auken, Frisvoll & Stewart, 2010).

Finally, I will further decolonise this research by making it accessible to the participants. After all, it is written in academic English, which means that this information is not accessible to the Indigenous community I worked with. I agreed with Proterra that when this master's thesis is submitted, I will make another information brochure in Spanish that summarises the testimonies of the women leaders. Through this method, not only will the Witoto women have a short

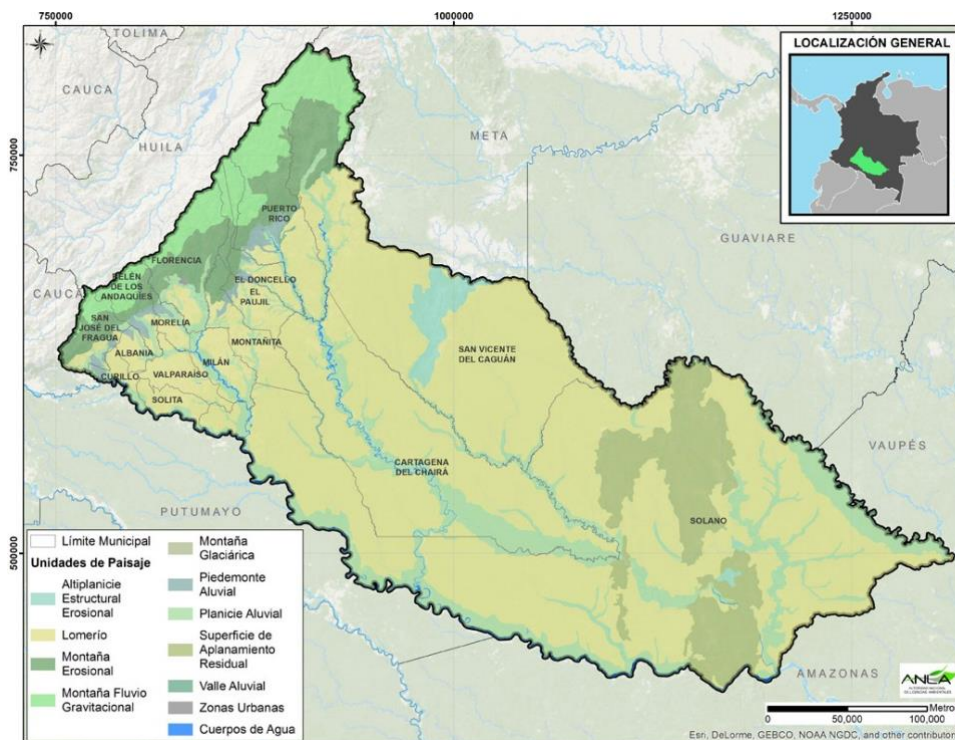
reference book of the research, but it can also serve as a source of inspiration for other Indigenous women going through a similar process.

In the next section, I will situate the Indigenous group where the participatory observations and most of the interviews took place.

3.3 Situating Caquetá and Witotos

3.3.1 Geography Caquetá

The 'Caquetá' region, located in the northern part of the Amazon rainforest (Tobón, 2018), covers some 88,965km² (ANLA, 2016-17). It contains the transition from the eastern mountain ranges to the Amazon. The political-administrative level is divided into 16 municipalities



(Autoridad Nacional De Licencias Ambientales, 2016-2017).

Solano is one of the 16 municipalities in Caquetá. This cabildo is a small territory given to these people because of the displacement struggle in the region. It is also the place where the representatives of four other Witoto resguardos come together to discuss their territorial defence (ASCAINCA, 2020). To reach the community's Cabildo, I left the city of Florencia by land to Puerto Arango. This trip takes about 20minutes and costs 30,000 (COP) by taxi. On the banks of the Orteguzza River, I took a boat to the municipality of Solano which takes 4 hours and costs 70,000 (COP). Finally, I reached the Cabildo after a walk of about 15 minutes. Due to the

guerrilla oppression, this region is too dangerous to travel down to bajo-Caquetá and visit the women living in the four resguardos.

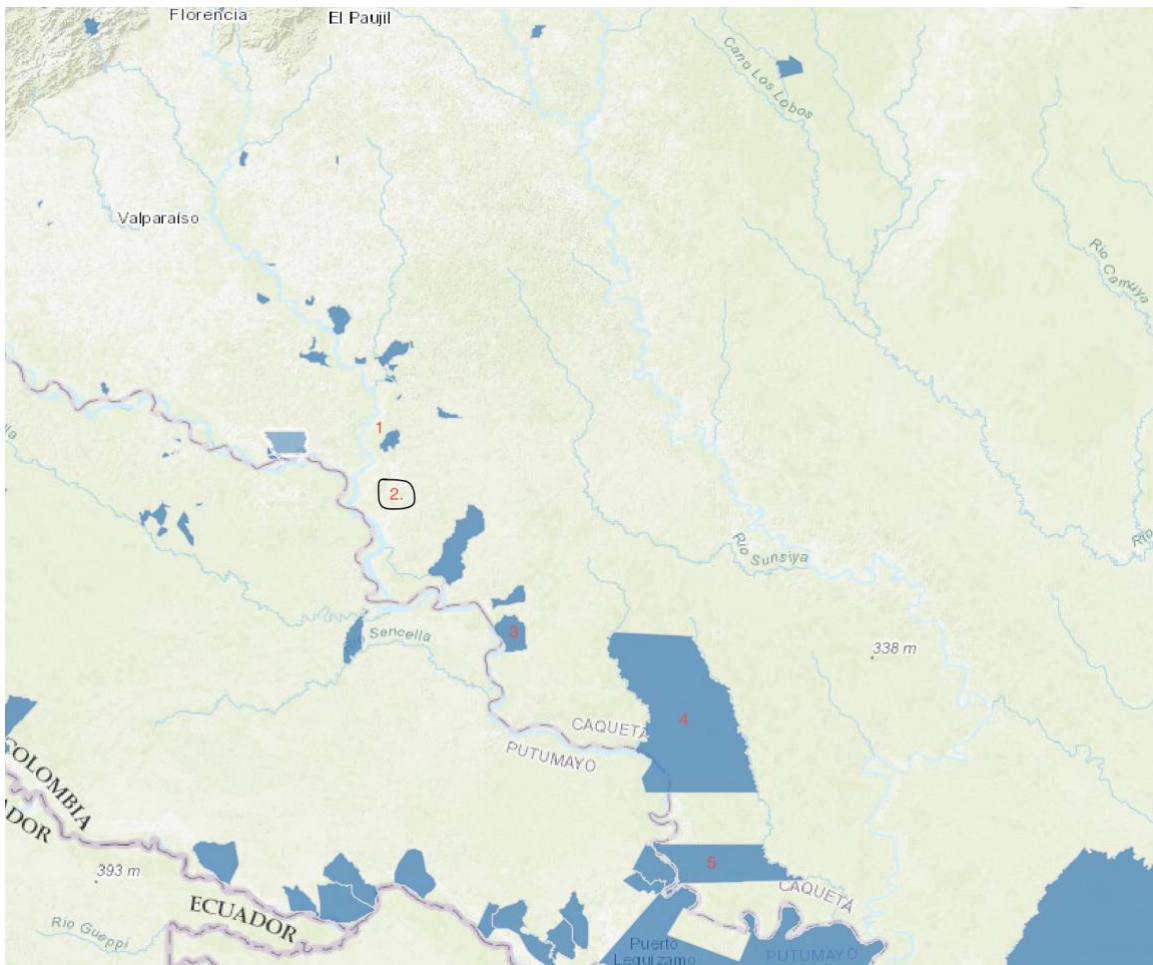
3.3.2 Demography

According to DANE (2005), the total Indigenous population in Colombia is estimated to be 1,378,884 people, corresponding to 87 ancestral villages. 933,800 of them live in the 710 existing resguardos recognised by INCODER, indicating that Indigenous people make up 3.4% of the total population. In the department of Caquetá specifically, there are 10,181 Indigenous people living in 45 resguardos inhabited by the Andoke, Coreguaje, Coyaima, Embera, Embera Katio, Inga, Makaguaje, Nasa and Muruí Muina ethnic groups (Gobernación de Caquetá, 2015). The Muruí Muina ethnic group, also known as the Witoto, Huitoto, Murui, Muinane, Uitoto, inhabits the southern Amazon region of Caquetá, settled on the banks of the Caquetá and Putumayo rivers. In the department of Putumayo, they are located on the middle course of the Putumayo River and in the department of Caquetá they are located on the Caquetá river. The Muruí Muina communities that are in the department of Caquetá are: El Quince, Coropoya, Huitorá, Bajo Aguas Negras, Estrechos, Estrechos, Coropoya, Huitorá, Bajo Negras, Estrechos, Quinche, Jerusalem, Coemaní, Caño Negro, Guacamayo, and Amenani, and the cabildo¹¹ Ismuina (USAID and TNC, 2013), and other urban cabildos located in the municipality of Florencia and San Jose del Fragua.

The communities who are part of ASCAINCA (Visión Amazoníco, 2021). and of which some women participated in my research are:

¹¹ Volgens decreet 1071 van 2015 zijn de inheemse cabildos "een speciale openbare entiteit, waarvan de leden behoren tot een inheemse gemeenschap, door haar gekozen en erkend, getypeerd een traditionele sociaal-politieke organisatie, die de taak heeft de gemeenschap wettelijk te vertegenwoordigen, haar gezag uit te oefenen en de activiteiten uit te voeren die haar zijn toegewezen door de wetten, de gebruiken, de gewoonten en de interne reglementen van elke gemeenschap" (ICBF, 2016).

1. El Quince (resguardo¹²)
2. Ismuina (cabildo)
3. Coropoya (resguardo)
4. Bajo Aguas Negras (resguardo)
5. Huitorá (resguardo)



(Portal de Datos Abiertos de la ANT, 2020).

¹² The Indigenous reserves are the collective property of the Indigenous communities in benefit of which they are constituted and, in accordance with articles 63 and 329 of the Political Constitution, they are inalienable, imprescriptible and unseizable (Ministerio de Agricultura y Desarrollo Rural, 2022)

3.3.3 Language

The Witoto population knows a variety of dialects. So within the ethnicity they do not always understand each other. *Minika* (meneca) is spoken at the headwaters of the Igaraparaná River and the banks of the Caquetá and Putumayo Rivers. *Nipode* (muinane: people from the east) is spoken in Putumayo, in the Colombian-Peruvian border region and near Araracuara and El Veinte in Caquetá.

Bue or *Mica* (murui: people of the west) is spoken in the department of Loreto (Peru) and the department of Amazonas (Colombia) and on the banks of the Caraparaná river (Observatorio del Programa Presidencial de Derechos Humanos y DIH, 2014; ONIC, 2020; Monaiyanhö, 2018).

In Solano, the region where my research was mainly conducted, Witoto people speak originally *Nipode* and *Mica*. That is why their ethnicity is also named as Murui-Muina (people from the east and west). However, due to the displacement of many Indigenous Witoto's, some Witoto's also speak *Minika* in this region. This is the original dialect of the Witoto's who live or used to live in La Chorrera, the region where the colonization principally happened.

3.3.4 Territorial threats

According to Gómez (2007), the first white man to set foot in the Amazon forest in Colombia was in 1898 when a man from Potosí called Benjamín Larrañaga appeared in the area. This man settled in La Chorrera. Fascinated by mirrors, needles, beads, combs and many other things, this is where slavery began. In 1902, Julio Cesar Arana, who in previous years had traded rubber on the Napo River and the Amazon, allied with Larrañaga and became the owner of the company 'La Casa Arana' (Gómez, 2007). During this period, many Witoto people were imprisoned and forced to work in rubber extraction (Monaiyanhö, 2018). The genocidal action

of La Casa Arana diminished a population of approximately 40,000 people, the majority of them were Witotos. Many of the survivors were deported to Perú and the rest were displaced through the jungle, until they reached the banks of the Caquetá River from Los Chorros de Aracuara to Solano Caquetá (Gómez, 2007). The Witoto's consider La Chorrera as their original territory (Ministerio de Cultura, 2010).

Nowadays, Colombia recognizes the rights of Indigenous people and slavery is abolished. "We are an Indigenous nation. In class we teach the young people that there are more than 40 articles of the Political Constitution that have to do with their rights and those of their communities, plus those that apply to them as citizens. They have a multicultural Constitution that they should take ownership of" (Garzón, 2020). However, the conflict in this region is very complex.. Together with the Metá region, Caquetá is the area in Colombia where most deforestation is taking place. This deforestation is both a function of cattle breeding but also serves land speculation and serves as a production area for coca. These processes are mainly in the power of the armed groups, which makes the inhabitants of the region extra vulnerable (Morales-Muñoz, 2021). Defending one's territory in Caquetá is thus certainly not a new issue for the Indigenous communities.

The threats in the Colombian Amazon stem from the colonisation projects established in the Andean Amazon foothills stretching along the Caquetá, Putumayo, Caguán and Orteguzza rivers and the main roads that developed over time. This was followed by a continuous evolution of 'land grabbing'. This land grabbing exists mainly in function of timber extraction and agriculture, including coca cultivation. The processes of land grabbing lead to problematic deforestation and territorial disputes in the Amazon. In addition, armed conflict is a key element in land use and decision-making in Colombia (Arias-Gaviria et al., 2021). There is a global demand for regional goods such as gold and coca as well as a domestic demand for steak and the expansion of the road network. These factors contribute to the development of illegal economies and the lack of convincing policies and budgets to support conservation projects (González, Cubillos, Chadid, Arias, Zúñiga, Berrío, 2017). Deforestation projects are currently moving from Putumayo to the southernmost part of Metá, along the "deforestation arc" that includes both Caquetá and Guaviare (IDEAM, 2019). According to the report "Cambio de la Superficie Cubierta por Bosque Natural" by IDEAM (2020), deforestation rates increased

significantly since the previous 2 years. The main cause of deforestation in Colombia's Amazon Forest is cattle ranging. About 18% of the national cattle industry takes place in the Amazon, mainly around Meta and Guaviare (ICA, 2019). Then there is smallholder farming, which consists mainly of coca cultivation. There was a large increase from 2010 and a decrease in 2018. Some 27% of coca production is located around Meta, Guaviare, Caquetá and Putumayo (UNODC-SIMCI, 2019). New areas continue to expand deeper into the Amazon (González et al, 2017). A third cause is the expansion of the road network. Some 76% of deforestation projects take place in areas closer to roads (IDEAM, 2019). Contrary to what might be thought, timber extraction is one of the less important reasons for deforestation (González, Cubillos, Chadid, Cubillos, Arias, Zúñiga, Berrío, 2017). Also, due to a decrease since 2017, mining projects are a relatively less significant cause of deforestation (SIMCO-UOME, 2020). Nevertheless, there is still significant gold mining mainly in the regions around the Caquetá, Orteguzaza and Vaupés rivers (González et al, 2017).

There are different ways in which the government reacts against this environmental degradation. Some solutions already widely applied: protected areas, recognition of IPLCs and land-use zoning. There are about 18 protected areas in the Colombian Amazon covering about 9.4Mha (RAISG, 2015). The Heritage Colombia project takes care of the management of these protected areas (WWF, 2019). Land-use zoning implies a specific division of the management of forest reserves where responsibilities are transferred to sub-national governments (Ovservatorio Regional de Planificacion para el Desarrollo, 2019).

As has become evident, the armed conflict is fueled by the scramble for land for political and economic reasons. This struggle in Colombia exists since decades. In 2016 the government signed a peace agreement with the leading guerilla group, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People's Army (FARC-EP). The presence of other illegal armed actors makes the conflict still prevail. The political division between Indigenous and peasant communities weakened cabildos and de-mobilised many resguardos. Several Witoto people told me that landowners often administered alcohol to Indigenous people in order to get them to sign papers and expropriate their territory. In this context, Colombia is worldwide the country with the highest number of murdered social leaders during 2019 (Sánchez, 2020). As a result, land ownership by large landowners was made easier again. Despite the government's attempt, agrarian reform was not implemented. This led to an ongoing agrarian struggle and the

emergence of guerrilla groups that still control many Amazonian areas, such as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the Popular Liberation Army (EPL) (Suárez, 2017). In Caquetá, it is mainly the FARC that is controlling the area. The armed conflict is destroying the autonomy, security and development of the Indigenous communities and their livelihoods. The Indigenous authorities have repeatedly opposed the war in their territories. There have been manifestations such as the Minga of Social and Communal Resistance in 2008, when more than ten thousand people marched from Cali to Bogotá in protest against the militarisation of their territories. The women who took part in these actions proposed new forms of protest and rejection of the conflict in their territories. For example, the monthly Minga for the Defence of Life was organised by women as a protest after the death of 6 murdered children and the murder of elder Lisandro Tenorio. Their demand is to stop child murderers and killers. They also demanded to stop exploiting women as a form of war booty (Suárez, 2017: 173-195).

According to Irazábal & Tovar-Restrepo (2014), the effects of armed conflicts are differently towards men and women. Contestation over their territory in the context of armed conflict modifies the ethno-gender-identity markers and roles of Colombian Indigenous women. There are clear negative effects on the sociocultural, psychological and material situation of the women themselves as on the well-being of their families. On the contrary, Indigenous women also notice the changes in ethno-gender relations. Many researchers approaching armed conflict contexts concluded that armed conflict has created opportunities towards women's empowerment. By taking in leadership positions, women resist violence by securing peaceful solutions and autonomy for their people. Irazábal & Tovar-Restrepo (2014) who found that this dynamic of women empowerment didn't only apply to Colombian women in a conflict context but also to Indigenous women, tries to bring nuance to this conclusion. It is still because of the tragedy happening to their communities that these women see the need to fill in these positions. This whole process comes with a great stress and emotional and material losses. To make an accurate assessment of these changing dynamics, it is essential to put the Indigenous women's appreciation, towards their new positions, on the first place. But it is sure that there is paradox in the fact that conflict in Indigenous territories is opening new windows for women on political level. Indigenous women's form of resistance through organizations and other collective initiatives demonstrated that they play a crucial role in holding back the violence in Colombia.

Furthermore, they redesign and reimagine a more inclusive Colombian nation. Thus, Irazábal & Tovar-Restrepo (2014) concludes that autonomy and agency have a big influence on the ethno-gender roles and cultural patterns as a response to conflict. It results to a more peaceful outcome of conflict and stimulates postconflict conditions.

3.3.5 *Displacement*

“Displacement is an integral element of Eurocentric modernity and its post-World War II manifestation in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, namely, development. Both modernity and development are spatial cultural projects that require the continuous conquest of territories and peoples and their ecological and cultural transformation along the lines of a rational, logocentric order” (Escobar, 2004).

Currently worldwide, there are more than 48 million Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). Colombia, with the highest number in the world, counts 8.3 million IDPs (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2021). Even though the Colombian government implemented a law regarding governmental assistance for victims (Victims and Land Restitution Law 1448 of 2011) but the poor implementation is causing many victims being unable to meet their basic needs. This struggle results in a ‘protracted displacement’, referring to an everlasting situation of displacement (Loescher & Milner, 2009). Particularly, Colombian internally displaced women are affected because of the disappearance and death of their relatives. Besides, they have to cope with the loss of their culture and territory (Ruta Pacífica de las Mujeres, 2013). Indigenous and Afro descendant women are the most vulnerable groups because of their intersectional experience of discrimination. They have less job opportunities and are often exposed to risks such as sexual violence, due to the intersection between their gender, ethnicity and status as displaced (Comisión Interamericana de Derechos Humanos, 2006). Furthermore, they experience a disconnection with their cosmovision and culture because of the loss of their territory. In this manner, their traditions, norms and beliefs are disappearing due to the hinder to pass on their culture to the coming generations (Rodriguez, 2008).

Several studies demonstrated how forced displacement caused women to start testifying about gender violence and to realise the importance of their participation in defending the autonomy of their people (Castillo et al., 2017: 249). An Indigenous Triqui woman from Mexico testified in a study by De Marinis (2017) about confronting the new possibilities of participation, responsibility and political roles during their forced displacement. "As women, it was more difficult for us to come to the sit-in. But when we got here, we realized that we had to do what we had never thought of doing, or what we didn't know how to do. We had never participated, at least in political matters, like we do now. It was the men who participated, and we didn't even know how to speak, or how to speak in front of many people, least of all of political issues".

Because of the conflict in lower Caquetá, this 37-hectare territory was allocated to displaced Indigenous families. The last Huitoto woman who arrived here 8 years ago with her family told me that the land belongs to the Indigenous collective, but each family has its own plot with its own *chagra*. So, the whole territory is already divided, leaving no room for other families. She is very grateful for this opportunity and especially because they could make the land fertile again and by building some *malokas*, among other things, they can continue their culture. Another woman told me that she never lost touch with her original territory. This everlasting connection was a motivation for her to fight for the rights of her community, many of whom were still left behind.

3.4 Witoto (Murui-Muina): Hijos de la coca, el tabaco y la yuca dulce¹³

“When the creation of the world was finished, the father creator asked himself, where will I place this creature of tobacco, coca and sweet yuca, he answered himself: I am going to leave it in the centre of the earth, to take care of life, of nature, like the guardian of the door of the great maloca, which is the world.”¹⁴ (AZI de cabildos, 2010).

3.4.1 Culture and gender

I would have liked to devote a large section here to the Witoto culture, but the scope of my research makes this impossible. After all, the Witoto culture is so rich in knowledge, rituals, practices and cosmovision. I also found it very difficult to really understand these cultural aspects as an outsider, because I do not understand the whole cosmovision and origin behind it. These origin stories are usually only told by the abuelos but during specific moments like the mambeadero. In addition, the stories often differ per region where the Witoto people live. To understand this, I think a researcher needs to live with these people for at least a year, but even then you have to admit that as a western educated person with a different mother tongue, you will never fully understand this culture. Because my research focuses on Witoto women, I automatically started asking questions about how gender shapes Witoto culture. In this section, I briefly describe the practices and beliefs that I discovered the most about during my stay. These are cultural aspects that immediately catch the eye because of their great value within the community. These cultural characteristics are inherently Witoto and therefore emic information described from an etic perspective. I will describe them based on what I observed myself, what I was told during interviews and participation observations and based on what I found in the literature. This is always done from a gender approach.

¹³ Children of coca, tabacoo and sweet yuca.

¹⁴ See appendix 6.6 for Spanish citation.

In the Witoto community I studied, there is a complementary view on gender:

*“Although we are accompanied by men as well, because as Indigenous people I cannot speak only of women, because we are duality, we are complementarity, but not complementarity to use each other, but to serve each other and to move forward.”*¹⁵ (N. Herrera. Personal communication. 02.04.2022)

Both the man and the woman are seen as equal, wise persons. They do not compete with each other but complement each other. The woman makes the cassava and the man goes hunting or fishing. Together, they speak the Indigenous language to their children, but in other spheres, the approach to education differs. Fathers teach the boys how to hunt and fish, mothers teach the daughters how to sow the seeds.

*“In all the communities it is different, but it is always more noticeable that the man is the one in charge of maintaining the household in economic matters, so he is the one who works for the sustenance of the family, to bring the meat, the firewood... everything for the household. And the woman is more in charge of looking after the children, cooking and looking after the children's education. These are like the two roles that you see in the Indigenous communities. So we are the ones in charge of looking after and teaching the children because it is said that it is through us that the transmission of cultural knowledge also begins, so there is also an important role there.”*¹⁶ (Coordinator ASCAINCA. Personal communication. 26.03.2022).

¹⁵ See appendix 6.7 for original Spanish citation.

¹⁶ See appendix 6.7 for original Spanish citation.

3.4.2 *La maloca*

The *maloca* has different meanings. According to one of the women I interviewed, it symbolises the existence of her people as an Indigenous group. When they fled to the Cabildo Ismuina, building the *maloca* was very important to show the outside world that they were continuing their culture. The *maloca* is thus a symbol for passing on their culture because it is here that songs, stories, traditional food, (dance) ceremonies, rituals and so on are shared (Gómez, 2007). This *maloca* in Solano has existed for 14 years. According to the grandmother (la *abuala*), the *maloca* is like a university or a library where the thoughts of the ancestors are kept.

Before colonisation in the clan community, women had a privileged place within the social life, since they had the role of adviser and decided on family and community matters. In the social organisation of the Witoto, clans had the upper hand, they had a very strong hierarchical social stratification, so much so that they considered others to be *jiba kome* or *jiba komini* to refer to ordinary people or clans who lacked knowledge and *malocas* to perform ritual and traditional ceremonies. This aspect would show that work and cultural knowledge can become symbols of power, as a commoner cannot hold positions of authority (Monaiyanhö, 2018).

3.4.3 *El mambeadero*

El *mambeadero*, is a ritual performed every night in the *maloca*. Here, only the men¹⁷ talk to each other and to the spirits of the territory. They do this by consuming their sacred plants, coca and tobacco. Coca is consumed in a green powdered form called *mambe* (hence the name 'mambeadero'). Coca is considered to be a sense of concentration, reflection and analysis. Tobacco (*ambíl*) is a plant from the West Indies, a sacred plant for the Witotos (Gómez, 2007: 35). Among the Witotos, tobacco usually takes the form of a brown paste and is called *ambíl*. *Mambe* is only consumed by men, in combination with *ambíl*, but because of its energetic value,

¹⁷ This is mainly 'el consejo de ancianos'. See chapter 3.4.6.

mambe is also exclusive to men. Women do consume ambíl, but usually only during (dance) ceremonies). According to Gómez (2007), one consumes when the body needs it.

During the mambadero, traditional knowledge is passed on, political relations are discussed, the men decide on matters such as who can join the cabildo, but also on the management of the forests, the trees, the animals and the water. The respect for the spiritual life is very important. One makes contact with the spirits to guide them in the management of the territory. From a conversation with a female ASCAINCA coordinator, living in the cabildo Ismuina, I learned why the mambadero is a place where mainly men gather. Men are more in touch with the spiritual side of the territory. It is more about the knowledge. Women are during the mambadero, traditionally represented through the typical drink 'caguama'. Today, women are also effectively present. They sit in the corner of the maloca, behind the men, often weaving and listening. Around 7pm, the women leave and the men often stay up late. The coca and ambil give them enough energy to talk until late at night. When I asked her if she would like women to have a voice during the mambadero, she said that this would cause a cultural clash. It is also good that there are male-only and female-only areas. For example, women have the chagra where they share their personal issues and it would not be appropriate if men suddenly wanted to participate here.

3.4.4 La chagra

“The relationship of women with nature is with great affinity, because first they weave, they are in their chagras through the seeds, the collection of seeds, they are integrated with the forest... when they have their food too... So, although they do not have the capacity, although Indigenous women do not have the capacity to know the territory in one way or another, through the chagra and their seeds they know part of what their territory is, right?”¹⁸
(Coordinator ASCAINCA. Personal communication. 26.03.2022).

¹⁸ See appendix 6.9 for original Spanish citation.

Even before colonisation, the strength of the Witoto woman, the feminine power, lay in the variety of crops she could grow in her chagra, in the knowledge of how to use medicinal plants for healing and in her ability to teach.

This is also why the woman symbolises abundance, she is the one who, through the chagra, ensures that the community does not lack nutrition. This identity has made women the protagonists of resistance and the survival of Witoto culture (Monaiyanh , 2018: 34-35). Today, more and more women participate in projects as caretakers of the Amazon forest in cooperation with (inter)national NGOs. This movement has ancestral and traditional value and tries to restore the coexistence between man and nature that was damaged by the Western logic based on the exploitation of nature (S nchez, 2020). Visi n Amazon a del Minambiente developed the project 'Mujeres cuidadoras de la Amazon a'. This was done with the financial support of the United Nations Development Programme¹⁹ and the Global REDD for Early Movers Programme (REM), a project of the German government to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from deforestation. The Global REDD for Early Movers Programme (REM)²⁰ is also supported with official development assistance (Visi namazon a, 2018: 8). The organisation Proterra, together with the Witoto coordinator for the woman, family and children for Indigenous cabildos in the high rivers of Caquet  (ASCAINCA), wrote a motivational letter to Visi n Amazon a. In late 2020, the cabildo was chosen as one of 69 sponsored projects to protect the Amazon through female perspectives (Programa Peque as Donaciones, 2021).

It is during this project, led by Proterra and TNC, that I mainly conducted my research. Together with the participating Indigenous women, the focus was on the creation of a common chagra for the women. Previously, chagra was a individual family project. Now they were trying to bring women from different families together. In addition, regular meetings were organised in the cabildo Ismuina where women from the different ASCAINCA communities came together to reflect on this process. Through the chagras, not only was the connection with the territory strengthened and the management improved, but the mutual connection between the women was also reinforced.

¹⁹ Programa de las Naciones Unidas para el Desarrollo (PNUD) (visi namazon a, 2020).

²⁰ Official development assistance (ODA) receives 0.7% of the gross national income of developed countries spent on aid for the developing countries on the OECD list (OECD, 2022).

3.4.5 *La palabra dulce*

*La palabra dulce*²¹ is a vision in which the woman's word is seen as a peaceful instrument to avoid conflict situations. Yuca dulce is the symbol of the woman and hence her word is also considered "soft" (Comisión de la Verdad, 2020).

*“So, when we say that the woman is the sweet word, it is because she is the complementarity of the man, so she is there to sweeten the heart of the man. When something goes wrong for a man, she is there to give him the peace of mind he needs. And in events like this always... the woman does not go to the mambadero, only the man goes, but the woman is represented there in the caguama, so the woman makes the caguama and leaves it there and the man consumes it, so the woman is represented there.”*²² (Governor Resguardo Huitora. Personal communication. 19.03.2022).

3.4.6 *Socio-political structures*

Within the local Witoto community there are different circles or levels through which the community is managed. This structure is variable depending on the specific Witoto community, demonstrating regional variations. Especially in the presence of women, there are remarkable differences. Based on the information collected through the interviews, I can state that all communities belonging to the Indigenous organisation ASCAINCA are relatively progressive in terms of women's participation. Based on the information I provided through conversations with women living in the Ismuina cabildo as well as through Proterra, I attempt to illustrate such a socio-political structure.

The first or inner circle consists of the Cacique. This is the highest level of authority in the community. He has an advisory function and will, for example, support the governors in their

²¹ Translation: the sweet word.

²² See original citation appendix 6.10.

decision making (Governor Coropoya. Personal communication. 19.03.2022). He is the one who is going to protect the whole culture and is the one in charge of maintaining the culture and harmony in the territory and among the Indigenous people. It is important to understand that the cacique not only governs as an authority of the community but also as a traditional authority. He is in fact connected to the forest through his spirit and soul. This position can only be occupied by men. The cacique is selected by the *Consejo Ancianos* (Council of Elders) and by the community. When you are elected to this position, you retain this status for the rest of your life. (Proterra. Personal communication. 14.03.2022).

The second circle *el consejo ancianos* consists of both the Cacique and *el consejo de sabedoras*²³. The councils of wisdom are those *abuelos*²⁴ who have the most knowledge to accompany the cacique and the community so that the tradition is not lost. They manage the spiritual theme during the *mambadero*, the space where the *consejo ancianos* meet. This circle is also entirely masculine (Proterra. Personal communication. 14.03.2022).

The third circle is a relatively recent formation and concerns the administrative part of the community. Here, women are allowed to participate because the organisational tasks required by the job are more likely to be attributed to female capacities (Governor Huitora. Personal communication. 19.03.2022). Of the 5 communities from which I spoke women at the meetings in the *cabildo Ismuina*. Three of the five governors are female. The main task of the governors is the external communication towards other communities, authorities or stakeholders (Governor Coropoya. Personal communication. 19.03.2022). Being a leader does not mean that decisions are made alone. First, the community is brought together so that in consultation with the elders and the other community members, a decision can be made. Similarly, the decision on who is elected governor is made by the whole community (Governor Coropoya. Personal communication. 19.03.2022). This position is often occupied by younger people; they often understand the language of the external world better. This regularly causes communication problems with the traditional authorities (Proterra. Personal communication. 14.03.2022).

²³ Translation: the councils of wisdom

²⁴ Translation: grandparents

At the zonal level, the most significant organisation for the 5 Witoto or Murui-Muina communities (4 resguardos and 1 cabildo) with whom I worked, is undoubtedly their own collective, ASCAINCA. Its fundamental purposes are: the strengthening of the Murui Muina (Witoto) culture, the representation of the members with political, democratic and participatory criteria that contribute to the harmonious development of the community, and the internal and external participation linked to the management as a contribution to the solution of social and environmental problems. As a Indigenous organization, it values freedom, solidarity, equity and respect for diversity as the basis for the construction of a new multi-ethnic and multicultural society. The vision of ASCAINCA goes as follows: by 2041 it will be an organisation with different functions, recognised for its community management and attention to the community. It will be a model for self-management and socio-economic development that will radiate its presence at local, regional, national and international levels, improving the quality of life of its members. Its programmes or projects will cover different areas of development and knowledge, it will offer an active environment with varied scenarios and will use appropriate communication technologies for the transmission and construction of knowledge. It will be made up of a group representatives of each community, previously trained, creative, supportive and participative, guided by the values and respect for the Murui Muina (Witoto) cultural traditions, integrated in an organisational structure, flexible, dynamic and adaptable to change. The communities come together in the *asamblea general*. It starts with the *consejo de ancianos*, where one anciano from each community is represented. After this there is a *consejo disciplinarios* and these are the governors of each community. Then the coordinators are present. These are specific coordinators appointed in function of ASCAINCA, such as the coordinator for the women and family. So, since the last four years, women's participation has certainly been increasing. Several women leaders told me the downside of the Indigenous man's political life. Because of the contact with the political and capitalist outside world, they adapt their lifestyle to this. This created the statement 'the Indigenous person likes to drink but does not know how to drink'. So, it often happens that they lose their mobile phones, lose information, come too late to meetings and so on. Their leadership is lost to alcohol (Teacher Ismuina. Personal communication. 25.03.2022).

See appendix 4. for details about the broader Indigenous organizational landscape.

3.5 The rise of Witoto female leadership

3.5.1 *Witoto women and colonization*

The Witoto community has had a very painful colonial history. Industrialization in Europe increased the demand for rubber. In order to keep production costs as low as possible, they started occupying the Amazon. Rubber in Spanish means ‘*caucho*’, so this period is known as ‘*la cauchería*’. This kind of relationship was not new since the glory of industrialisation happened on the back of the global south. Thus, interests were established to control the rivers and ensure the flow of raw materials as inputs for the growing capitalist economies. This area was not controlled by the Colombian or Peruvian government at the time of the rubber industry. The most notorious rubber company at the time was called ‘La Casa Arana’. This was an English company based in Peru that colonised the Colombian Amazon via the Amazon and Putumayo Rivers (Monaiyanhō, 2018: 39-40). In the Amazon, colonial control was mainly in the hands of Spain and Portugal until the early 20th century. However, the role of Britain, one of the most important importers of rubber and exporters of related products, was fundamental to the rubber economy, which not only determined the Amazonian rubber boom, but also its decline in 1941 due to the expansion of rubber plantations by Britain and the Netherlands in their colonies. In 1900, rubber from the Amazon represented 60% of the total world production, in 1914 it was only 27% and in 1930 less than 2% (Molina, 2007). According to Palacios (2006), the “rubber barons” and the Colombian state collaborated in campaigns promoting the civilisation of the Indigenous people in the Amazon region. In this case, the state did not intervene directly, as it was in the middle of the war between liberals and the church. Besides, the private sector (rubber companies) was in charge of direct intervention in the areas. This partly explains the lack of a public regulatory mechanism that identified and controlled the abuses and genocide that took place. Even though slavery had already been abolished in Europe in the 19th century, the British were complicit with the Peruvians in the application of this crime against humanity against the *Witotos*, *Okaina*, *Muinane*, *Bora* and *Andoque* in the Amazon. Despite the evidence of these crimes, there has

been no historical trial for these crimes against humanity in order to grant reparations by the British, Peruvian and Colombian perpetrators (Monaiyanhö, 2018: 64).

Violence against women also acquired a political and economic character. In the Amazon region, a misogynistic hatred was practised whereby the ruler saw the Witoto women as a sex and rubber production machine (Monaiyanhö, 2018: 52). The reason for the intense violence against women during the rubber era in La Chorrera lies in the cultural conflict between two worldviews of the oppressor and the oppressed, reducing women to the ultimate objectification. The problem of violence against women was exacerbated in the rubber age by the contempt of Europeans and mestizos for the original peoples of the Americas (Monaiyanhö, 2018: 57). The propaganda against Indigenous women was always exaggerated by referring to their moral weakness, their fornication and sexual perversion. It even went so far as to affirm that rape was not a crime but a custom. There was therefore no reason to prosecute the white perpetrators (Gargallo, 2014: 113).

According to Latin American communitarian feminism, Indigenous women already exhibited specific forms of exploitation before the colonization of the territory. It is claimed that women's bodies were abused in different ways during the appropriation of local knowledge, land and resources. The female body became a victim of violence and subjugation. She is, after all, a symbol of control, production and renewal of places where life is reproduced. These feminists argue that the struggle for the recovery and defense of their territories and lands must go hand in hand with the struggle for the recovery of the female body. Historical and oppressive violence exists both for the first, actual body, and for the historical territory, the land (Cabnal, 2017: 98-102; Paredes, 2010: 117-120). Communitarian feminism therefore differs from decolonial Latin American feminism, which perceives the subjugation of the female body as a colonial fact. According to these decolonial feminists, the body is also a territory under the domination of invaders. Indigenous women's bodies are said to be permeated by the European invasion. Because the body also experiences emotions and sensations, it is also a place of resistance. It offers the possibility of developing strategies of consciousness that lead to actions of collective liberation (Grijalva, 2012; Lugonas, 2011). Specifically in the Witoto culture, there was an enormous amount of machismo present in the culture of the previous generation. Girls were seen as inferior because they did not carry the name of the family. Her job consisted of cooking,

washing and working in the *chagra*. This kind of machismo still exists today in more isolated communities (Environmental promoter Ismuina. Personal communication. 25.03.2022).

According to origin stories, the Witoto woman, the mother: a deity, represents fertility, beauty and abundance (Monaiyanhö, 2018: 33).

Despite a beautiful cosmovision of what it means to be a woman in Witoto culture, women, the symbol of sweetness and abundance, have also suffered from clan violence before the rubber extraction. In some clans, girls were given away by a chief or the father. Having a husband meant banishment. They lost their rights within their clan of origin and became part of the husband's clan. Women also suffered physical violence from their partners as well as psychological violence through the perpetration of adultery by the husband, which was very common among clan chiefs. In brief, the woman, who was equated with mother earth (pachamama) and the sweet word (la palabra dulce) but paradoxily she was the object of violence within her culture. This violence became immensely more cruel during the rubber exploitation (la cauchería) and later with the presence of the Spanish mission in the Witoto territory (Monaiyanhö, 2018: 35-36). During the rubber trade, Witoto women were deprived of their right to participate by being denied their traditional role as community decision-makers within clan organisations. Besides, their ability to give life and reproduce culture was likewise denied. Thus, women become mere sexual objects and, as slave labourers, their humanity is denied because they are treated worse than animals. When a woman became pregnant by a rapist, she could no longer relate to a clan member, which led to exclusion. Girls were recruited from the age of 6 to marry rubber barons (caucheros) who sometimes had 20 to 30 wives for immoral purposes. Other forms of direct violence, besides rape, included caning, whipping, drowning, shooting, as well as live burials, group cremations, and so on. It is necessary to clarify that this violence was experienced not only by the Witoto women and their people, but also by the Okaina, Muinane and Bora women of La Chorrera and by various Indigenous peoples of eastern Colombia (Monaiyanhö, 2018: 57-73). Rubber exploitation created violence against women in a multidimensional way. They were attacked physically, psychologically, economically, sexually and on the basis of gender. In addition, the woman's entire family was also targeted and attacked in a context where there is symbolic violence towards the entire culture (Monaiyanhö, 2018: 58-59). However, since they are Indigenous women with an integral view of life, other ethnic and differential forms of violence can be categorised, such as

cultural, spiritual, territorial, family and food violence, which together with physical and sexual violence have caused mistreatment and integral damage to their being. Since the Witoto woman is the pillar of the culture, all the actions exercised against her directly affect her body, family, children, older adults, culture, territory, chagas, and men. (Autora, 2019). Cultural violence is symbolic violence, expressed in a wide range of media - religion, ideology, language, art, science, media, education - and serves to legitimise direct and structural violence, and to inhibit or suppress the response of those who suffer. (Autora, 2019). An example of cultural violence during the rubber exploitation was, for example, the killing of tribal chiefs, sorcerers and wise men and the burning of the malocas. This type of violence can be considered the worst of the three types of violence because it had the greatest impact due to the destruction of all expressions of culture, symbolism, spiritual authority and knowledge, as a symbol of political violence against the Indigenous peoples. This violence also affects the most people and it is also a manifestation of capitalist economic policies (Monaiyanhö, 2018: 59).

Testimony about the *caucheria*: "(...) *Man and woman functioned the same. Men and women did the same job, regardless of their age and whether they were pregnant. Women built huge fields and planted corn to raise pigs. If women had children, they had to work the next day, with the children on their backs. My mother always said: "...we suffered".* (Interview 09/25/ 2015 discussed in research Monaiyanhö, 2018: 62). This went completely against the Witoto culture which is based on complementarity and places enormous value on motherhood.

3.5.2 *What is a female Witoto leader*

There are several dynamics between Indigenous women and political arenas. The first focuses on the analysis of Indigenous women's links with political parties and their relationship with the state. According to Mendez (2009), there is a lack of analysis of what it has meant for Indigenous women to participate in these representative and institutional positions and the challenges they encounter. Besides there is also a need to analyse the impact of these political institutions on the social, cultural and personal aspects of these Indigenous women's lives. The second perspective focuses on analyses of how women have participated in Indigenous grassroots organisations, how they have assumed decision-making leadership positions and/or how they participate in the political training schools of these organisations. For example in Colombia, there are the schools of the National Organisation of Indigenous Peoples of the Colombian Amazon (OPIAC), the National Indigenous Organisation of Colombia (ONIC) and the Indigenous Organisation of Antioquia (oia), which seek training in rights and organisational tools for dialogue with the state or to hold political positions in their organisations (Ulloa, 2020: 19).

There are different kinds of approaches to analyse these dynamics. On the one hand, from a feminist perspective, one can look at the emancipatory processes that take these women out of unequal living conditions. This approach is often done in a homogenising way and does not take into account the specific cultural context and historical situations. Another focus may be on participation in national and transnational arenas and Indigenous women's networks. Furthermore, the focus is on how women perceive the territorial and environmental struggles. This differs from the previous approach where the focus was on the emancipation of women themselves and less on the collective struggle. It also specifically looks at the creation of institutional spaces for Indigenous women in public policy. Then there is the perspective used by women and/or human rights organisations. They try to strengthen the debate around Indigenous women's rights. In short, these analyses focus on interacting with political scenarios. These approaches also try to analyse the role of international organisations and the implementation of gender and equality policies and their effects on the Indigenous population (Méndez, 2009). These multifaceted scenarios become sites of advocacy and positioning of their demands, but it is necessary to analyse how Indigenous women conduct politics, what they bring to their demands and what their priorities are. However, these analyses focus on a

conventional conception of politics, as opportunities for Indigenous women, and do not take into account other conceptions of politics (Ulloa, 2020).

Finally, there are approaches to political participation that reconsider the idea of the political and focus on everyday practices and other ways of doing politics, perspectives that question the categories which homogenise the political (Ulloa, 2020). Similarly, there are approaches focused on the formation of female leaderships that seek to understand personal trajectories in a contextualised manner (Gómez & Sciortino, 2018). So, this dissertation starts from a combination of the two latter approaches. I did not use a definition of what constitutes a political sphere and let women speak who were seen as leaders by the community. I interviewed women who worked for or are trained by organisations such as OPIAC or ONIC, but also women who had a great responsibility within the community and were seen as leaders. In her political engagement with the women of the Camëntšá people to which she also belongs, Chindoy (2018) similarly deals with the everyday practices of weaving, as mechanisms of memory and social cohesion that enable political influence on the future of her people. These approaches allow an understanding of the political from the everyday practices by paying attention to the personal or collective dynamics of Indigenous women (e.g. poetry and theatre) that affect other contexts in multiple ways, starting with the physical.

For me a leader... there are many leaders, there are many types of leadership and among the communities there are leaders that even if they are not here talking to the people, they are leading from other spaces, from the kitchen, from their weaving, from the chagra... so to be a leader is to be a person who in one way or another picks up the problems that they have within their own space. In other words, if something is not working in the kitchen, I will try to fix it. If something is going wrong in the knitting, she will try to fix it. So we have many roles of leadership within the communities themselves, who may not have the potential of those who are here, but they are exercising leadership in the communities, they are doing well. But generally in their families, they continue to work to maintain a home, to give them the ability to provide for their families, and there they are also exercising leadership. Oppressed, but

exercising leadership (laughs).”²⁵ (Coordinator ASCAINCA. Personal communication. 26.03.2022).

“For me a leader is, first of all, a woman, a woman who can be a mother, a daughter, a wife, a granddaughter, a woman to who God gave her the capacity to lead both the people and the family, her friends, all that concerns her in her, not so much how to say I represent this community but how I can support it, how I can interact with the people, because many times, sometimes, the leader is the one who manages, the leader is the one who says this is done.... No, a leader must listen to the needs of his community and represent and seek actions when a community has a problem, he is the one who seeks actions to mitigate the damage that is being done to the community, for example, in the case of my community, the mother tongue is being lost, so a person as a leader must seek and project and come to seek the rescue of that mother tongue.”²⁶ (Governor Resguardo Huitora. Personal communication. 19.03.2022).

According to the Indigenous view, nature and culture are inherently intertwined. The territory is experienced both as the living environment and as the precondition for the continuation of their culture (see chapter 2.1.3). Female leaders are therefore seen as the defenders of the territory and their culture. The broad interpretation of the word territory therefore also creates a broad interpretation of the word leader. Some of the women leaders I spoke with are, for example, women who work in the chagra, who weave baskets, who are governors, who maintain traditional food and also promote this food, who make an analysis of the natural environment together with environmental NGOs, women who teach at a school especially for Indigenous youth, who work as coordinators of human rights, coordinators for women and families, and so on. By valuing these different positions proportionally to a leadership position according to Western standards, we can conclude that these communities are less meritocratically classified than the dominant Western society.

After all, in Western society, political leaders are given more prestige than someone who works in the fields

²⁵ See appendix 6.11 for original citation.

²⁶ See appendix 6.12 for original citation.

3.5.3 Motivations female leaders

A great inspiration for a lot of Witoto women is María Clemencia Herrera Nemerayema. Due to the evangelization in La Chorrera (her territory of origin), she was forced to go to a Christian school and assimilate to the Christian culture. But she refused to forget her *Minika* mother tongue and reminded her classmates of their culture, what the chagras were like, what the communities in her territory were like and what the role of Amazonian Indigenous women was. Ever since, she became a voice of the Indigenous people and in the meanwhile she has won numerous national and international recognitions for her work. Today, she is the founder of the Political Training School for Amazonian Indigenous people, a collaboration with OPIAC. It is a school where young Indigenous people get trained to protect their territory. Her dream is to set up an intercultural university in the heart of the jungle. Besides, she has been working for more than 30 years to empower Amazonian women through education. María Clemencia is the founder of the corporation *Mujer, Tejer y Saberes*²⁷, where displaced Indigenous women based in Bogotá (Colombia) put their knowledge into practice to generate income (Lizcano, 2020).

“So, she came here to the territory, and I started reading about her and finding out about her. And I said one day I will have to be like her, and she inspires me to work with the people. Look here in the territory, women are being able to study education from 6 to 11 through a scholarship that she has given to the compañeras²⁸. So, she inspires me to be a brave woman like her and to work for her people.”²⁹ (Governor Resguardo Huitora. Personal communication. 19.03.2022).

²⁷ English translation: women, weave and knowledge.

²⁸ English translation: female companions.

²⁹ See appendix 6.13 for original Spanish citation.

According to an adolescent living in cabildo Ismuina, gender discrimination is a great reason why women began to represent themselves more in political spaces. “Now we are all equal and we have an equal right to hold any position, it might be a man or a woman, it might be a homosexual or any other person, now everything is equal.” (Personal communication. 23.03.2022). Back in the days it used to be different. Then there was no time for women to participate in these spaces. Women were responsible for the children, the harvest, the preparation of the food and so on. There was no birth planning, so women continued to work during pregnancy or went to work in the chagra with their children on their backs. It used to be wrong for a man to carry a basket on his back. He only had to carry firewood, heavy things. It was seen as wrong for him to carry a child. (Teacher cabildo Ismuina. Personal communication. 25.03.2022).

*“Here in Ismuina we've kind of changed that way of... because if a woman has to go out... well, she has to go out, and the husband has to stay, and if one doesn't have a husband or something, then a relative takes care of the children and everything. Here in Ismuina we have already taken this equality, because we have had many visits and suddenly the information arrives, because we are here in the municipal capital.”*³⁰ (Environmental promotor Ismuina. Personal communication. 25.03.2022).



(Source: ASCAINCA coordinator for women, family and children)

³⁰ See appendix 6.14

Nowadays, specific female leadership capabilities are also recognised. For example, women are much more orderly and therefore maintain better economic management. Male leaders tend to be often drunk, which causes the administrative part to be messed up (Governor Resguardo Huitora. Personal communication. 19.03.2022).

3.5.4 *Political interests Witoto women*

When asked which needs the Witoto women have, they usually speak in collective terms. Women's issues are often still not discussed. Proterra also criticises white feminists who travel to Indigenous communities to speak about sexual and reproductive rights. According to them, it is a form of neo-colonisation. These women are first and foremost the caretakers of the land and their communities, so allies should always start from this collective viewpoint. However, defending territorial rights is also a means of meeting women's needs. It is a means of representation of women (Proterra. personal communication. 16.03.2022).

The political interests of Witoto women are very diverse but at the same time very intertwined. The struggle to protect culture cannot be separated from the struggle to protect territory, food sovereignty, human rights, legal aid, access to education, etc. It is striking how gender equality is now also associated with the previous struggles. Both indirectly and directly, the struggle for territory is linked to the struggle for gender equality (Ulloa, 2020). Below, I will elaborate on some of the themes that the woman brought up during the interviews.

3.5.4.1 Protection of the culture

This was the theme that was raised the most, both during the workshops, interviews and daily conversations. The cultural identity of the Huitoto community characterizes itself by their food, dances, songs and prayers, their housing, their *coca* and *ambíl* and their traditional crafts (Gómez, 2007). The woman is seen as the representative of cultural aspects such as: the education of the new generation, food sovereignty through the *chagra*, the handicrafts and the continuation of the Witoto language (ASCAINCA, 2020). Therefore, the empowerment of women goes along with the empowerment of the previous cultural matters.

“A woman for me is the source of life, she is the fundamental pillar of a society, of a culture in this case, so that it continues in the time, yes? Because it is the woman who gives life, she is the one who cultivates that life or that seed, and not only in terms of children, but she also takes care of the seed of life, of food, of knowledge, because the woman is the one who has that first relationship with her child, and that is where a whole community starts.”³¹ (Ninfa Herrera. Personal communication. 02.04.2022).

The group discussions during the workshops, as well as personal conversations, revealed how concerned people are about the loss of the Indigenous traditional culture. The community can no longer be separated from many western influences such as digitalization, but also economically they depend on the export of vegetables, fish and handicrafts. But here too, people are still looking for a balance. The biggest problem is that many young people are leaving the communities. By studying in a public school or through contact with digital media, young people sometimes give up their culture for that of the dominant culture. On the one hand, the dominant culture is sometimes more attractive and on the other hand, they integrate here to avoid discrimination.

³¹ See appendix 6.15.

An initiative started by the Ismuina community to protect this traditional culture is the establishment of a primary school exclusively for Indigenous children. Here, for example, the Indigenous language is taught as a matter of principle, and Spanish is taught as a subject. This certainly comes from a concern that Witoto children are losing the Indigenous language (Gómez, 2007). Another initiative taken by the women is the preservation of the seeds to avoid the extinction of various plants. Thus, food sovereignty is also an important issue for them. Projects such as strengthening a communal chagra or setting up a business to sell handicrafts to women are also examples of such culture-protecting initiatives. These will be discussed further (see chapter 3.5.6).



(Source: ASCAINCA coordinator)

*“The defense of mother earth is to take care of her, to take care of her because she is our life. If she is out of balance, that is when storms come, when floods come. Deforestation is not right in the eyes of the Indigenous group. Why? Because we were raised under the natural law, that we must interact with that world because in the world we are here now, but in the mountains, there are spiritual people who are taking care of the land, who are taking care of the mountains.”*³² (Governor resguarde Huitora. Personal communication. 19.03.2022).

Ancestral cultures bring humans closer to nature on an equal footing and in a relationship of harmony and respect. For this reason, Amazonian Indigenous communities are paying homage and gratitude to mother earth through dances and healing rituals. To return to the path of tradition is to return to give meaning and value to the spaces of life such as the rivers, the salt lakes, the lagoons, the streams, the lowland forests and the different species of flora and fauna that inhabit the Amazon region, whose relationship with us is represented through a totemic familiarity from the origin of life itself, This leads us to change the vision of extractive practices that affect the forests and deepen climate change, such as logging, burning and posterization of the forest, uncontrolled hunting and fishing, as well as the use of timber species solely for commercial purposes, forgetting other important uses for the life of the community itself, such as food, medicine, handicrafts and others (ASCAINCA, 2020). By working in the *chagra* and maintaining a balance between giving and taking, these women take care of Mother Nature. In addition, I noticed that the female perspective on the relationship with nature has been increasingly represented in meetings with other conservation organisations such as Proterra and TNC. Processes of IPs and women against extractivism raise criticisms and offer alternative proposals to the modernity/coloniality relationship, to extractivism and patriarchy, by proposing other logics and practices of gender relations, as well as highlighting the imposition

³² See appendix 6.16

of the class, ethnic and gender inequalities that were established with the processes of modernity/coloniality (Ulloa, 2016).

An example of a successful territorial defense action is the resolution drafted in cooperation with the national government to give the Witoto community in the municipality of Solano full rights over the territory. This way, their land cannot be dispossessed by e.g. peasants. (Environmental promotor Ismuina. Personal communication. 25.03.2022).

3.5.4.3 *Creating alliances*

Depending on the level at which women take on leadership roles, the types of alliances will also vary. For example: together with her Witoto people, Ninfa Herrera (working for the Colombian government), improved the flow of information between the communities and the government by having the cabildos recognised at the national level (Personal communication. 02.04.2022).

On a more local level, the environmental promoter of the Ismuina cabildo, is working with the non-governmental organisation TNC to write an environmental analysis. “There are many things that have been lost among the Indigenous people because the Indigenous people do not write, you will never see them digitalize (...) although a leader has been fighting for his territory, he dies, and all that has ended because the direct agreements that were made, were not written or signed. That is where it ends.”³³ (Personal communication. 25.03.2022).

³³ See appendix 6.17

3.5.4.4 Gender violence

This theme was most raised by women who already have a voice within and/or outside the community. Some women are already very satisfied with the progress in gender equality compared to a few years ago. However, there are still many women who feel that too much of the burden of caring for children is placed on them. In addition, two women with key positions (one within the community and the other within the government) mentioned that domestic violence and other forms of discrimination are certainly present, but this is still taboo. A study conducted by OPIAC reveals how some Amazonian women did spoke out their concerns towards traditional authorities and generated internal dynamics which are valid for analysis. Among the women themselves who have a holistic and integral reading of realities, they prioritise collective issues such as territory, autonomy, education in their agendas, but fail to identify or prioritise serious and particular situations of violations of the rights of specific groups. Thus, the greatest resistance is the recognition of their condition of vulnerability, not only on their part, but also on the part of their leaders (Herrera Nemerayema & Duarte, 2020).

So, the current work is mainly focused on the emancipation of women leaders who fight for territorial rights. However, I do expect that in the future, there will be more and more debates on gender equality due to the high needs. But this can only happen if it is addressed by the Witoto women themselves.

3.5.5 Challenges of female leadership

One of the greatest threats to the political participation of the Witoto woman is the lack of opportunities. A space in which women can engage academically or economically is still not a given. In addition, men are naturally educated for leadership from a young age (Governor Resguardo Huitora. Personal communication. 19.03.2022). Following this, their opportunities

are often limited to looking after the children. When a woman leaves the family for her job as leader, she will be extra stressed with the worry for her children. This discrimination often happens in the family but also when entering political spheres, women still feel stigmatised as less capable. For example, when a man makes a mistake, he will be punished less severely than a woman (Governmental Witoto leader. Personal communication. 16.03.2022). Subsequently, young politicians are also taken less seriously (Coordinator ASCAINCA. Personal communication. 26.03.2022). Male leaders often abuse their position by promising female leaders promotion if they have sex with them. Although the Witoto culture is no longer as machoistic as it was during colonisation and before (see supra), machoistic characteristics are undoubtedly still present. Even when one leaves the community to fight for their territorial rights in the western world, one ends up going from one patriarchal culture to another patriarchal culture.

“And many women have suffered, for example, my aunt, she has 8 children, and her husband won't let her take on a position or go to the entities or meetings, I am very aware that the tribe where my aunt is from, is very machoistic (...) There in their community women don't go out, there are women cans, but they don't go out, because the husband won't let them, and if they go out they tell them not to come back, "go away and don't come back", because you are a woman, you are from the house, you don't have the right to go out, not to a meeting or anything.”³⁴ (Environmental promotor. Personal communication. 25.03.2022).

In addition to the disappearance of women in the private sphere, many women also experience domestic violence. Due to the taboo, this struggle has not been spoken about as much. Due to my position, it was more difficult for me to talk about this subject with the interviewed women. I suppose the bond of trust was not strong enough. Also, during the women's meetings, this was not discussed because of the taboo and the risk of being abused, but some women leaders told me that this struggle is definitely present. "You look at them as if nothing is happening, but internally they suffer from violence in their homes." (Governmental Witoto leader. Personal communication. 02.04.2022). In addition to domestic violence, there are also many men who leave their wives alone with the children. This makes their financial situation extremely

³⁴ See appendix 6.18

precarious. It is precisely these challenges that encourage female leaders to speak up for the women whose voice is silenced. The inequality between male and female leaders is not only noticeable in social terms but also in economic terms. The salary of one of the female leaders working for the Colombian government is 5 million pesos compared to 7/8 million pesos for a male leader (N. Herrera. Personal communication. 02.04.2022).

There are also challenges associated with access to education. First of all, the chances of an Indigenous person joining a public university after graduating from high school are very small. The lack of opportunities means that many end up in illegal business, prostitution, drugs or even commit suicide. This is one of the reasons why the suicide rate of young people in the territories is so high. When an Indigenous person gets the chance to study at a public university, they often face loneliness. To study at a university is to enter a westernized, individual world with a very different diet. This creates an alienation from one's own culture as the new culture is not always suitable for everyone. In addition, it is often even more difficult for women to go to university because of pregnancy and/or caring for children (Herrera. Personal communication. 16.03.2022). There are some schools that strive for diversity, but most of them are not like that. Even the university of Florencia (the capital of Caquetá) has hardly any Indigenous students. It is furthermore very hard to be admitted to public schools and the private ones have a high price tag (Coordinator ASCAINCA. Personal communication. 26.03.2022). The fear of leaving traditional culture behind when joining a non-Indigenous school is similar to the fear of women entering political spheres. This also leads to alienation from traditional customs. It is therefore an additional challenge for an Indigenous person to find a balance between the western and traditional world (Proterra. Personal communication. 14.03.2022).

A major challenge for the Indigenous people is to translate their needs into Western legal terms (Castillo et al. 2017). They are standing with one foot in the traditional world and the other in the western world. This can also cause internal conflicts between the administrative part (managed by the governor) and the traditional authorities within the community. Administrative leaders are often young people with an education that allows them to better understand the language of the external world. This can cause miscommunication towards the traditional authorities (Proterra. Personal communication. 14.03.2022). Subsequently, Indigenous (women's) needs cannot be generalised. Indigenous women displaced to the city, have other

needs than Indigenous women in the Amazon who have other needs than Indigenous women in La Guajira, the desert or in La Sierra Nevada, the jungle in the north of Colombia (ASCAINCA coordinator. Personal communication. 26.03.2022).

A final challenge that I would like to mention here (this does not exclude other possible challenges, but I am limiting myself to the ones that were discussed the most in my data), is jealousy between female leaders. During the meetings with the women in cooperation with Proterra, it regularly came up that women often do not grant each other's success. Therefore, I noticed the importance of these spaces exclusive for women to support each other.

3.5.6 *Strategies of reinforcement female leaders*

Reinforcement, as does 'leadership', has many meanings. For every woman, reinforcement is something different, depending on interests and talents.

“For me the reinforcement of women is ... it is like a wall or a barrier through which women begin to empower themselves, to believe that they are important, to see that in the spaces of participation their word is taken into account instead of claiming that their word do not count or that their word is not worth anything, but that they should believe that their position is important (...). That for me is the empowerment of a woman.”³⁵ (Ascainca coordinator for women, family and kids. Personal communication. 26.03.2022).

According to this definition, female reinforcement primarily means strengthening one's voice by believing in one's own power and validating it by the community. This reinforcement, as discussed earlier, can take place in different spaces of weaving, cultivation, continuation of the Indigenous language, education, economic independence and so on. This section discusses

³⁵ See appendix 6.19

some of the strategies that have been brought forward by the women themselves, the community and their stakeholders together to achieve this empowerment.

3.5.6.1 Access to education

Due to the difficult access to regular university (see chapter 3.5.5), initiatives are emerging to bridge the gap between Indigenous communities and an education that combines different world views.

In the Political Training School for Amazonian Indigenous people, there is a module focused on explaining the role of Indigenous women. There, both men and women listen to the class while they weave. There is no exception. María Clemencia insists on rescuing the role of women and giving them the same place as men as a strategy to deal with machismo and the opposition of many (Lizcano, 2020). This school was undoubtedly a great impetus for many women I interviewed to become leaders.

For example in Colombia, there are the schools of the National Organisation of Indigenous Peoples of the Colombian Amazon (OPIAC), the National Indigenous Organisation of Colombia (ONIC) and the Indigenous Organisation of Antioquia (OIA), which seek training in rights and organisational tools for dialogue with the state or to hold political positions in their organisations (Ulloa, 2020: 19).

Some Witoto women within cabildo Ismuina, made their own economy out of the tradition of basket weaving. This economy was created in a partnership with other Indigenous women of the Nasa and Koriguaje ethnicities and with the support of some stakeholders. Thus, a multicultural association called 'Niga' is formed in function of: firstly the economic independence for these women, secondly a way of conserving their culture and thirdly as a new role for women within the communities. I will illustrate these advancements by following citation:

“(...) we can tell you that there are some women, not all the women, who see the need to sell their handmade products as a way of strengthening the economy of each family, because considering that we are close to the urban centre, this makes it necessary to sell our products. And apart from that, we don't have enough land to plant all the different native species that we have, so that means that food sovereignty is reduced, and we were having difficulties with that, and so canasto³⁶ is strengthening the economy of several artisan families and through that also strengthening our culture, because we never move away from our own culture because it is part of our experience as an Indigenous people. (...) So, this is a way for us to organise ourselves, to express what we need and to seek solutions to those needs. So this organisation has looked for all these possibilities to continue to strengthen us and to generate confidence among all of us because here we are not only talking about women, but we also make men an integral part too, because we are all integral in our Indigenous people, we never say that it is only one gender, but that everything is integral. (...) But in the same way we have also looked for ways to sustain ourselves, to preserve, to conserve our own culture, but also to look at the importance of the role that Indigenous women play within our communities.”³⁷ (Canasto Witoto Women. Personal communication. 24.03.2022).

³⁶ *El canasto* means the craft of weaving baskets

³⁷ See appendix 6.20



(Source: ASCAINCA coordinator for women, family and children)

The commercialisation of the baskets is still in its beginnings, but is already perceived very positively as a form of women's reinforcement. In addition, the women themselves see it as a form of cultural preservation. In this way, they can motivate young people to continue their culture. Despite the positive perspectives of the women in the *Niga* network, there are also women who take a different view. They work mainly in the *chagra* in a non-profit profit way. For them, women's empowerment does not equal economic independence. Food sovereignty and the connection of women through the *chagra*³⁸, on the other hand, do.

According to Canessa (2012), commercialisation can have the opposite effect and damage their culture. Many members of the Indigenous population move to the city because of a larger market to sell their traditional products. In addition, it loses its symbolic value because of the financial value. So again, according to him, there is a contradiction where women's emancipation goes hand in hand with the loss of their culture.

María Clemencia Herrera is the founder of the corporation *Mujer, Tejer y Saberes* (Mutesa), a space created in 2004 in which displaced Amazonian women living in Bogotá put their ancestral knowledge into practice to generate income, reinforce the values of the original peoples and stand up against discrimination. The corporation has a typical food restaurant, a handicrafts

³⁸ In chapter 3.5.6.5 'alliances and reinforcement', I discuss the strategy of NGO Proterra and TNC to strengthen these *chagreras* (women working in the *chagra*).

centre and even a clothing studio where they create their own designs to maintain the Amazonian culture (Lizcano, 2020). "I built a space where women artisans learn to make their own economy and generate income," explains Clemencia. It is very important because they have needs and no resources" (Herrera, 2020).



(Source: ASCAINCA coordinator for women, family and children)

3.5.6.3 Women spaces

According to one of the female Witoto leaders I spoke with, spaces exclusive for women are necessary when talking about women's issues. Therefore, the project of Proterra which created a communal *chagra* for all the women is very valuable. Beside the *chagra* there are more spaces that only involve women for example: weaving, handicrafts, clay workshops etc. Furthermore, she told me that when men are integrated, women tend to be silenced. Although nowadays there are more men that recognize the important role of women in territories and that women spaces should always be there.



(Source: ASCAINCA coordinator for women, family and children)

3.5.6.4 Community reinforcement

It is characteristic of Indigenous thinking that emancipation can only be achieved through collective unity (Ezaro, 2010). Women's emancipation is therefore, according to most women, also a man's affair. Women may be held responsible for the *chagra*, the education of children, the handicrafts (see political interests: protection of culture), but this does not mean, according to them, that this is only a woman's affair. Men also play a role in the creation and preservation of these cultural aspects. During the group discussion with the women who own their own basket business, they often emphasised that they would like to integrate more men in this process. Also, the women who participate in the *chagra* project often emphasised that men also have a role in the *chagra* and therefore they should also be involved in these reinforcement projects. Other women also stressed the importance of involving young people in the *chagra* so

that cultural traditions are passed on from an early age. In this way, they want to strengthen whole families and thus the whole community, in a cultural way.

According to the women, by strengthening the whole community, mutual support is also strengthened and this is also a prerequisite for creating good leaders, when the community also supports their leaders. Despite the divided views on the women who work in the chagra and the women who work for *niga* (the weaving economy), there are also women who strive for a middle ground through mutual support.

“We already discussed, that, if someone wants to be a leader, we support her. For example, we have a women's committee where my cousin, she is the leader there. So, we support her. You are going to be the leader, we need to do this among women, you organise it and we support you. The same with canasto, they have an association that the leader does this and they support her. Sometimes we support them, and they support us. Since we are involved in different projects, we are involved in chagra and they are involved in handicrafts. If they need support, obviously we support them, they need that, yes... Now that is being done a lot, because before it wasn't like that, before it was every man for himself, if I leave you, you leave me... Now we don't, now we have much more connection, more organised, we are overcoming all that. Here in Ismuina we have been working like this”³⁹ (Environmental promotor.

Personal communication. 25.03.2022).



(Source: ASCAINCA coordinator for women, family and children)

³⁹ See appendix 6.21 for original citation.

TNC, Proterra and Tropenbos⁴⁰ are NGOs that help analyse and strengthen the ecosystem in cooperation with the Indigenous movement ASCAINCA. Protecting Indigenous rights equals protecting the ecosystem and vice versa, which is why this is a logical alliance. They also united with surrounding campesinos⁴¹ in function of the protection of the territory. According to one of the female leaders in ASCAINCA, Proterra is the first organisation that addresses the gender issue and therefore specifically targets women through the project 'las Cuidadoras de la Amazonía' (see appendix 2). This is the first ally to do so. It is also only women who work for this project of Proterra, so according to the Witoto leader in charge it would also create more trust (ASCAINCA Coordinator. Personal communication). It is important to note that not all women criticise this traditional political division of men and women within the culture. The women with whom I conducted interviews, were mainly women who committed themselves as leaders with the intention of promoting female participation. A first problem that Proterra noticed during the leadership trainings, is that women feel they have to leave their tradition behind due to this new role. So according to them, it is very important to maintain respect for traditional knowledge when working as an ally of an Indigenous movement. Still, it is a challenge for Western organisations to work on gender without coming into conflict with traditional knowledge. Anyway, nowadays it is impossible to ignore gender in the goals of international, national and local organisations. This is partly due to the SDGs (sustainable development goals), drawn up by the United Nations, which also include gender equality. These serve as a guide for organisations striving for a sustainable and social world (Esquivel & Sweetman, 2016).

In September 1995, the Fourth UN World Conference on Women took place in Beijing. This conference became a clear call for the 'mainstreaming' of gender approaches in policymaking (Hafner-Burton, & Pollack, 2002). Gender mainstreaming can thus be seen as a strategic elaboration of gender and development. It is a political strategy globally accepted by

⁴⁰ These are the NGOs I came into contact with during my research. So I certainly do not exclude that ASCAINCA does not form alliances with other organisations.

⁴¹ These are Colombian rural inhabitants who often live from cattle breeding and therefore also benefit from territorial rights.

international, national and local organisations. The concept is mainly promoted by international organisations. A criticism of this instrument is that it becomes bureaucratised and loses its focus on fighting gender inequalities (Parpart et al., 2000). Another criticism is how NGOs sometimes implement gender as a strategy in their projects in order to get more donations, but in fact they do not have the expertise to do this correctly (Wendoh & Wallace, 2005). There is a trend in which gender mainstreaming is also increasingly incorporated into the approach of environmental movements (Arora-Jonsson, & Sijapati, 2018). It was not until 2007 that a UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples was formulated. These rights are linked to equal rights for men and women. The declaration literally states in Article 44: "All the rights and freedoms recognized here in are equally guaranteed to male and female Indigenous individuals." This declaration has been adopted by 143 countries (The General Assembly, 2007).

All over Latin America, Indigenous women are uniting in the defence of their political rights in order to put violence, conflict, violation of rights, exclusion and inequality against women on the agenda. The reflection on these processes has recently increased enormously (Ulloa, 2020). According to Wendoh & Wallace (2005), in order to engage in effective gender mainstreaming it is crucial to take into account the complex realities that people face. A sensitive approach to local values is also important. This whole process should not be rushed and should be done in cooperation with the local community. Next, the link between gender and poverty must be made. If women are not given the same access to resources to take control of their lives, gender equality is impossible. According to a study on African NGOs by Wendoh & Wallace (2005), most NGOs fail to have a good approach to gender mainstreaming because of the importation of gender concepts by international agencies and donors. Yet there are NGOs that found a way to make gender equality happen in cooperation and understanding from the local communities. They found a way to approach local needs by listening and working together with the local population. In this way, NGOs can ensure that they do not have to impose gender concepts that immediately conflict with religious beliefs and cultural values. An important strategy is to form a strong alliance with local leaders, whether they are political, religious or traditional leaders. Since leaders are usually men, this also ensures that men will support the gender equality project and avoid the feeling of exclusion. The main conclusion is that the starting point for change lies in the communities themselves. After all, they have the capacity

to reflect on their situation and the need for change (Wendoh & Wallace, 2005). Based on the above conclusion, I argue that it is therefore up to institutions and NGOs to contextualise their concept of gender continuously and not simply impose it as this may not be effective in practice.

❖ Implementation gender mainstreaming by environmental allies.

The project 'las cultivadoras de la Amazonía' (see appendix 2.) is in my opinion a good example of a successful cooperation between Proterra and TNC and ASCAINCA. It was drafted in cooperation with the local representative for the woman, family and child, and sent to higher institutions to receive funds. Based on my observations, conversations with the NGOs and the women who participated, I noticed that the focus was very much on the needs of the women. In the project script (see appendix 2), the goal is described as follows: "Strengthen the knowledge, skills and know-how of Witoto Indigenous women from three resguardos and one cabildo of ASCAINCA to promote leadership, participation and empowerment of women through the development of training and traditional practices in the chagra, contributing to the conservation and care of the forests of the Colombian Amazon." The connection with the ASCAINCA women's representative was very strong, so the needs of women were clearly communicated. The insider perspective of the ASCAINCA leader gave TNC and Proterra the right information on what gender issues exist in the community and how to address them. By creating a common chagra, a space was created where women could unite by protecting that part of the territory for which they are responsible, which is the place for cultivation. This place is thus extremely valuable both to (re)connect with their culture and the territory and because here women's issues can be discussed in a safe, private way. Furthermore, the workshops were adapted to the Witoto cosmovision and language, in combination with play and theatre to stimulate the women's self-confidence. See appendix 5 for the details of one of the workshops that I helped to design, in which the connection between the woman and the territory was central. In the end, knowledge about the relationship between gender and the territory, was created by the women themselves and can now be processed by Proterra and TNC into a report to ultimately strengthen territorial rights as well as women's rights. Proterra is a small organisation that has been working with the community for many years, so trust is high. The

project specifically for women took place over a year, which meant that new gender concepts were not imposed from one day to the next. It was rather a dynamic process in which both groups could learn from each other. The women indicated that this project had certainly strengthened their voices. One striking criticism that I did hear several times was that in the future they would like to involve the children and the men as well in such projects, in order to strengthen not only the women but the whole family. So, collectivity is still priority for many within this Indigenous community. On one side, I agree that this could be a working point for Proterra in the future. Men should fight just as hard for gender equality. As Wendoh & Wallace (2005) point out, when only women unite, men can also feel excluded and this can have the opposite effect. On the other hand, I did feel that for some women this was the first time that they could make their voices heard and they also feel excluded when only women unite and this can cause the opposite effect. On the other hand, I did feel that for some women this was the first time that they had been able to express their views and felt that they were being supported in women's specific needs. This is only a small sketch of the influence of this organisation on the gender concepts within these Witoto communities, further research is required to form deeper conclusions about the influence of allies on local gender concepts.

Conclusion

The conclusion consists mainly of the correlation between various forces associated with the reinforcing process of female Witoto leadership. For example, we noted that women's empowerment is also associated with youth empowerment and cultural preservation. A contradiction then is, for example, how the empowerment of women is accompanied by the westernisation of the Indigenous culture by starting up their own economies, participating in political spaces or attempting public schools. These areas are often dominated by western discourses and challenge the traditional culture. Then it is interesting to consider how alliances can strengthen traditional culture as well as the position of women and territorial rights. After all, from the Indigenous point of view, the strengthening of women implies the strengthening of the whole traditional society and the territory. However, this strengthening of women can also have the opposite effect because of the inevitable cooperation with Western institutions. It is therefore up to these institutions to also adapt their language and ontological visions to the vision of these Indigenous women in order to counter neo-coloniality. By contextualizing gender systems, it is therefore important not to see these cultures as static entities but rather to recognize the relational dynamics between the different categories.

This research contributes to this decolonisation process by formulating motivations and alternative proposals of Indigenous women in order that stakeholders can take these perspectives into account.

The meaning of being a female Witoto leader, according to the women involved, does not correspond to the dominant, conventional view that links it to political parties, movements and institutions. These women reconsider political participation by focusing on everyday practices and other ways of doing politics. A leader is someone who picks up problems inside the workspace. This space can be the kitchen, the weaving space, the chagra and so on. In this way, it questions this homogenised category and the hierarchy between these different roles. Someone who works in the chagra is thus seen as an equal leader with someone who works on environmental policy at the institutional level. In my opinion, this appreciation should also exist in the West for those who choose to practice permaculture, for example. Furthermore, a leader must represent the needs of the communities (for example: the preservation of the mother tongue).

The motivations of these women for challenging this role and thus initiating a process of reinforcement are diverse. The most common are: to repair the cultural damage caused by colonisation, to restore discrimination against women and to raise awareness of specific female leadership capacities. Their political interests mainly claim collective goals although lately there has been more interest in specific women's needs. In any case, female participation in the territorial struggle is a means and an end in itself for women's reinforcement.

There are several challenges associated with female leadership. First, there is a lack of opportunities such as a space in which women can engage academically or economically. In addition, political participation or the chance to go to a public school is often accompanied by alienation from one's own culture. For example, one has to learn a new legal Western language. An additional challenge for an Indigenous person is thus to find a balance between the western and traditional world. Another barrier is the woman's duty to take care of the children and the family. This leaves little time to participate in spaces of leadership. In addition, there is still a stigma (inside and outside the communities) around women (and young people too) that they are less suited for leadership. Due to the disappearance of women in the private sphere and the underestimation of their capacities, they often find themselves in a lower economic position than men. Although there are multiple ways of exercising leadership within an Indigenous community, jealousy still exists between female leaders.

The various political interests are inherently linked and cannot be separated. The protection of culture is mainly discussed because the woman is seen as an important representative of the cultural tradition (e.g. the education of the new generation, food sovereignty through the chagra, the handicrafts and the continuation of the Witoto language). The cultural maintenance also implies the territorial defense. After all, culture is based on an ontological relationship with the territory, assuming that man and nature are one. This spiritual ecology assumes a balance between giving and taking from Mother Nature. Processes of IPs and women against extractivism raise criticisms and offer alternative proposals to the modernity/coloniality relationship, to extractivism and patriarchalism, by proposing other logics and practices of gender relations, as well as highlighting the imposition of the class, ethnic and gender inequalities that were established with the processes of modernity/coloniality. Among the women themselves who have a holistic and integral reading of realities, they prioritise collective

issues such as territory, autonomy, education in their agendas, but fail to address serious and particular situations of violations of the rights of women. Yet the awareness is present among some women as well as the motivation to gradually open up this debate.

Discussion and recommendations

You will probably have noticed that challenges, motivations, political interests and strategies for reinforcement are inherently connected. Thus, challenges are translated into motivations and these again into political interests and subsequently, in cooperation with different stakeholders, are translated into strategies of reinforcement. At the same time, these stakeholder influences can also cause challenges, making it important to keep reflecting on this relationship. I have tried to contribute to the struggle of Witoto women by using these 4 characteristics. However, the scope of a master's thesis is too short to give a complete overview. In addition, this is still a processing of emic perspectives through an etic perspective which limits the reliability of my interpretations. In any case, I argue that it is also the task of Western researchers to challenge existing hierarchical structures and have them reshaped by Indigenous female knowledge in order to eventually contribute to the pluriverse as an alternative to the OWW. This is not an easy process because of the contradictory views within the communities themselves. Some women, for example, articulate the need for the development of their own economy so that women can become financially independent but in a way which preserves their culture. Yet some Indigenous women, as well as other critical voices, do not see this commodification of cultural products as a form of progress, but rather as a loss of the symbolic value of the culture. So there is a conflict between those who equate the reinforcement of women with the preservation of culture. On the other hand, some equate the reinforcement of women with economic independence and culture is seen in a dynamic context. Another conflict is that between the collective struggle and individual struggle. Stakeholders working on gender can fall into the trap of working with these Indigenous communities from Western visions on women's emancipation. In this situation, people are not actually qualified to work on this theme and gender is often a way to boost the organisations' image. By only talking about women's rights and ignoring the collective territorial struggle, some fundamental traditional values are

ignored. This can be seen as a form of neocolonisation. On the other hand, domestic gender violence is also reported, but mostly remains under the radar. As a result, women's rights sometimes remain a taboo subject.

The Indigenous ontology is something I think we in the West can learn a lot from, in order to repair neo-colonial relationships with both nature and Indigenous communities. Although the relationships between western stakeholders and Indigenous movements can be questioned because of the unequal relationship. For instance, Indigenous communities are forced to appropriate Western legal terms. Yet these Indigenous leaders themselves also indicate the need to form alliances. As a western ally, it is therefore important to break down colonial structures by taking Indigenous perspectives into account. A sensitive approach to local values is therefore important. Gender concepts cannot be imposed but must be reflected in consultation with the community, but first a relationship of trust is needed and this takes time. In addition, these women mainly need equal opportunities and resources. Clemencia Herrera and her entourage proved the effectiveness of a more accessible education that incorporates both Indigenous and western ecological perspectives. This is another example of how a pluriverse works. By giving them the opportunity to build their own economy in a fair way, but also the means to live in a food-sovereign way, it is possible to choose how to continue the culture. The foundation is to restore the relationship with the territory and therefore to give these communities territorial rights. This goes hand in hand with recognising the voice of women both inside and outside the community. In fact, it is the integration of all marginalised voices that is fundamental to the construction of the pluriverse. The integration of this female voice within the territorial debate is, according to these women, equally the task of the men. Thus, women's rights are also collective rights if they benefit the whole community.

This research has provided more insight into the changing role of the Witoto woman. Despite the influence of the West on these communities (the new style of clothing, changing economies, digitalisation, loss of culture, etc.), it is important to recognise these women as actors with agency. They are aware of these relationships and therefore, in their own way, seek ways to balance the Western and traditional worlds. So there is certainly a need for cooperation but it must always be constructed according to the needs and visions of the communities.

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APPENDIX

1. Presentation NGO 'Proterra' and my internship

Proterra is a non-governmental organisation that strives for optimal biodiversity management and integrated human development. It does so by generating actions, projects, processes, enterprises and innovative ideas with a social, economic and environmental contribution to strengthening sustainable and inclusive communities.

The organisation consists of four main departments: the administrative department, the technical department, the communication department and the cooperation department. My internship took place in the intersection between the cooperation department and the technical department. The cooperation department mainly consists of developing and implementing projects. The technical department rather consists of generating knowledge through research.

The projects at Proterra can, for example, be about ecological sensibilisation through workshops or generating a diversity of knowledge through cooperation with different environmental organisations and communities. Proterra believes that science is the key to solving socio-ecological problems. The creation of science and knowledge is stronger and more consistent when different views and approaches to knowledge are taken into account. This knowledge is not only focused on the (improvement of) the state of nature but also on the wider social structures of conflict and the achievement of a harmonious society between man, nature and the wider society. The organisation does not only work with communities affected by the environmental crisis but also with companies and organisations that want to work in a sustainable way. Proterra offers these organisations support in planning and developing economic alternatives that contribute to building a sustainable and inclusive society. This is done, for example, by mapping out the intrinsic capacities and effects on various socio-environmental areas on the basis of a SWOT analysis. These are sectors that work on fair trade, sustainable tourism, green business, social innovation, etc. In the capital city Bogotá, Proterra also organises symposiums that bring together different actors concerned with socio-environmental conflicts to reach agreements on territorial peace. In addition, Proterra shares this information not only in the involved circles but also with the world through Instagram, their website and a documentary they made last year in cooperation with a German environmental organisation and five Indigenous communities all over Colombia.

The approach that I learned the most about was the focus on the protection of biodiversity by working with Indigenous communities to develop a management plan to enhance the fauna and flora, generate knowledge about specific endangered species, conduct quality analyses of habitat and environmental variables, and so on. I assisted during two projects specifically on

nature conservation from the female point of view and during one project where both women and men were present. Despite the rich experience in working with diversity, last year was the first time they started a project specifically focused on Indigenous women. This initiative came from the observation that women were far less represented at the meetings. That is why Proterra sought ways to strengthen this participation of women. These women carry the Witoto ethnicity and come from five different Witoto communities spread out in Caqueta, Río Alto. These five communities, called Aguas Negra, Coropoya, Huitora, Ismuina and El Quince, form a network called ASCAINCA. This is a zonal organisation that works to defend territorial rights. They work closely with Proterra but also other NGOs such as Tropenbos and The Nature Conservancy (TNC). All these actors are also in communication with wider networks such as leading regional and national organisations like OPIAC and ONIC.

2. Project 'las Cultivadoras de la Amazonía' (ASCAINCA, 2020)

- **Project title:**
CULTIVATORS OF KNOWLEDGE: STRENGTHENING THE CHAGRA AS A TOOL FOR SOCIAL AND TERRITORIAL GOVERNANCE AND THE EMPOWERMENT OF MURUI MUINA WOMEN.
- **Place where the project will be developed (vereda, municipality, resguardo):**
4 Uitototo resguardos and 1 cabildo: Manaye El Quince, Coropoya, Bajo Aguas Negras and Ismuina, located on the rivers Caquetá and Orteguzaza in the municipality of Solano, department of Caquetá
- **No. of women directly involved:** 48 women
- **No. of families linked to the proposal** 136
- **ASCAINCA:**
ASCAINCA is an organisation that was born out of the need to represent the associated Uitoto Indigenous communities in processes of management, negotiation and agreement on plans, programmes, projects and activities before state institutions and NGOs, out of the need to demand the fulfilment of their fundamental rights as Indigenous people, as well as to prepare themselves individually and collectively to be autonomous in their own development, all of this in search of the benefit of the communities, seeking to strengthen the culture and the territory. The associated communities are 4 resguardos and 1 cabildo in the municipality of Solano: Manaye El Quince, Coropoya, Huitorá, Bajo Aguas Negras, and Ismuina, located in the basin of the Caquetá and Orteguzaza rivers in the municipality of Solano, department of Caquetá, covering a total of 90,082 hectares (see Annex 1. Geographical location of ASCAINCA's resguardos). As part of the organisation's formation, the Coordination of Women, Family and Children was consolidated, seeking to strengthen the processes and rights of the Indigenous Uitoto women of ASCAINCA in an integral manner, as well as to give women direct participation and leadership in the organisation's various

processes and projects. The main coordinator of the project will be Shary Letsy Jipa Garay, Coordinator of Women, Family and Children.

- **Objective**



During the last decades, we have been leaving behind the practices of itinerant, perennial and transitory crops that constituted the traditional "chagras", to implement pasture and monocultures under the idea that these agricultural models could generate greater profitability. Subsequently, hunting was implemented for the sale of animal skins, the exploitation of fine timber species for commercialisation, and the cultivation of coca for the production of coca paste, the only product that still seems irreplaceable, as it continues to be cultivated due to its high demand in the local, national and international market, and its relationship with territorial control and armed conflict.

It is important to mention that these land use practices go against the cultural principles of the Uitoto people, since, in our cosmovision, we are part of nature, which is why our myths and traditions bring us closer to a relationship of "brotherhood" with nature, as well as with the different species of flora and fauna that inhabit our territory, clearly represented in our totemic and toponymic identities. Thus, among the families that would benefit from this project, we find symbols and representations of the cultural affinity of the clans with the canangucho (k+nene), chontaduro (jimek+), pineapple (rosichi), boruga (+merai), deer (yaunda), mico maizero (joma), among others. Therefore, we understand that by sociocultural analogy, if these affinities disappear from our cultures, the meaning and sociocultural value that people and communities have with their ancestral cultural roots will also disappear.

However, it is worth mentioning that this problem affects Indigenous women in a different way, as this process of acculturation that weakens cultivation practices also puts at risk food

sovereignty/security, traditional medicine and our own knowledge, which is in our hands and which is part of our natural environment. Likewise, the role of "chagrera women" dedicated to working the land and caring for the family and the community through planting, food and ancestral medicine has been affected by other factors such as climate change and its effects on calendars and planting times, the migration of younger women to population centres and cities, and the consequent loss of a close relationship with this important space for the construction of knowledge and the reproduction of life in our communities.

For this reason, we believe that the role of Uitoto women is fundamental for the conservation of traditional knowledge and the strengthening of cultivation practices that have weakened over time, as we have a special relationship with the chagra and with the care of life in the territory, playing an important role in the conservation of the forests inhabited by the Indigenous peoples of the Colombian Amazon. The territories inhabited by the communities of the Manaye El Quince, Coropoya, Bajo Aguas Negras and Ismuina reserves are of great importance as they are located in one of the most deforested areas of the country, a process that is advancing along the Caquetá River from the foothills to the area of influence of the urban centre of Solano, in addition to having Indigenous reserves that can strengthen the ecological structure and can contribute to reducing this deforestation in different ways, such as working with neighbours in agreements for the management and integral conservation of the territories. On the other hand, some Indigenous territories function as "forest conservation islands" as in the case of the El Quince reservation, or as reforestation opportunities such as the Ismuina area, and in others they are important conservation areas such as Coropoya, Huitorá, and Aguas Negras (See Annex 1. Geographical location of ASCAINCA's reservations).

For this reason, with this project we seek to strengthen the socio-cultural sense of the forest, its management and that of the chagra, through the empowerment of the Indigenous Uitoto women of the ASCAINCA association, seeking their participation, leadership and influence in decision-making bodies, as well as the visibility of its importance for the care of life and the forest in our territories.

This will be possible by strengthening the chagra as a mechanism for rescuing and rethinking ideas, concepts, their own and other people's knowledge, as well as knowledge tools around

Uitoto Indigenous women; Understanding that through this process we seek to counteract the pressure that exists for the cultural transformation of the territories, consolidating initiatives that contribute to the autonomy and food security so vital in these times of isolation due to the Covid-19 pandemic, which is why it is very important to return to our own, so as not to be dependent on products from outside and external dynamics, and on the other hand adding to the development of proposals for our own economy, which will support the future sustainability and economic autonomy of women and their families.

- **General:**

Strengthen the knowledge, skills and knowledge of Uitoto Indigenous women from three resguardos and one cabildo of ASCAINCA to promote leadership, participation and empowerment of women through the development of training and traditional practices in the chagra, contributing to the conservation and care of the forests of the Colombian Amazon.

- **Specific:**

1. Strengthen the knowledge and capacities associated with the chagra as a sustainable productive system with its own knowledge through intergenerational dialogues of 48 Indigenous women of the Uitoto people, developing a training cycle in each of the resguardos and cabildo.
2. Establish chagras in each of the communities as a space for the practice and application of the knowledge acquired, as well as for the generation of food and medicines that contribute to the food security of our Indigenous peoples.
3. Visibilise the role of Indigenous women and their leadership through the creation of a Network of Chagrera Women and Seed Guardians made up of the participating women from each of the communities.
4. Strengthen the leadership, administrative, project management and governance capacities of 48 Indigenous women of the Uitoto people.

- **Expected Results:**

1. Four 1/4 ha chagras have been established in each of the communities, as a space for practice and application of the knowledge learned in the process, as well as for the generation of food and medicines.
2. 48 women from 4 communities have identified their needs, challenges, difficulties, opportunities and strengths in terms of territorial governance and food security through a training cycle with a focus on the management of the chagra and governance from their own cultural vision, complemented with some appropriate concepts.
3. 48 women from 4 communities strengthened their own knowledge and capacities around the value and importance of the chagra as a system of socio-cultural representations of the Uitoto Indigenous people (symbol of fertility-women) and as a space where the word that comes out of the maloca materialises.
4. 48 women from 4 communities constructed maps of their territories, stories of origin, species associated with the chagra, identifying the different clans and their relationship with the management of the world, the forest and the chagra.
5. 48 women from 4 communities recognise the importance of their leadership as chagra women and collectively build a pedagogical material that makes visible their own knowledge about the chagra, the management and governance of the territory from a woman's perspective, in order to facilitate the multiplication of what they have learnt.
6. 48 women from 4 communities strengthened their own knowledge and administrative skills in leadership, project management and governance and governability from their own perspective and from a woman's point of view.
7. A Network of Chagreras Women and Seed Guardians has been created to function as an instance of participation and articulation with the Coordination of Women, Family and Children and with each of the instances of ASCAINCA, and to empower the leadership of Uitoto Indigenous women.
8. A report has been produced that integrates the most important results of the training cycle and is a pedagogical input for the dissemination of the process in the communities of the 48 participating women, and in other neighbouring communities.

No	ACTIVITY	OBJECTIVE	FINAL RESULT	EVIDENCE
1	<p>A meeting of opening, spiritual harmonisation and integration between the 48 women of the 3 resguardos and the Uitoto cabildo to present and harmonise the project.</p> <p>Initial seed exchange</p>	<p>- Strengthen the knowledge and capacities associated with the chagra as a sustainable productive system with its own knowledge through intergenerational dialogues of 48 indigenous women of the Uitoto people through a training cycle in each of the resguardos and cabildos participating in the project.</p> <p>- Visibilise the role of indigenous women and their leadership through the creation of a Network of Chagrera Women and Seed Guardians made up of the participating women from each of the communities.</p>	<p>Commitment and integration of women in the project</p> <p>Initial seed exchange</p>	<p>Attendance list</p> <p>Audiovisual recording.</p> <p>Act of initiation</p>
	<p>A theoretical-practical workshop in each of the resguardos and the cabildo, on the meaning of "territory" for one's own culture, traditional stories and narratives of origin from a Murui Muina woman's perspective.</p>	<p>Strengthen the administrative, leadership, project management, governance and governability capacities of 48 indigenous women of the Uitoto people.</p>	<p>In each of the resguardos, a didactic product* is constructed, based on the women's vision of their territory, stories of origin, species associated with the chagra, identifying the different clans and their relationship with the management of the world,</p>	<p>Attendance list</p> <p>Audiovisual recording</p> <p>Pedagogical material produced during the workshop.</p>

			<p>forest and chagra.</p> <p>*A didactic product (poem, verse, song, writing, drawing, etc.) with the stories or narratives of origin in relation to the chagra in each of the resguardos/cabildos.</p>	
	<p>A meeting in each of the resguardos and the cabildo, with sabedoras and sabedores in the malocas, to get to know, recognise, document and promote the value</p> <p>The socio-cultural concept of the "chagra" as a symbol of "woman", a sustainable agricultural system in the forest and as a system of cultural knowledge of its own.</p>	<p>Strengthen the knowledge and capacities associated with the chagra as a sustainable productive system with its own knowledge through intergenerational dialogues of 48 indigenous women of the Uitoto people.</p>	<p>48 women from 4 communities strengthened their own knowledge and capacities around the value and importance of the chagra as a system of socio-cultural representations of the Uitoto indigenous people (symbol of fertility-women) and as a space where the word that comes out of the maloca materialises.</p>	<p>Attendance list</p> <p>Audiovisual recording</p>
	<p>A theoretical and practical workshop in each of the resguardos and the cabildo on the value of the forest, its traditional uses (timber and non-timber) and the chagra as a cultural symbol of sustainable forest management.</p>	<p>- Strengthen the administrative, leadership, project management, governance and governability capacities of 48 indigenous women of the Uitoto people.</p>	<p>48 women from 4 communities have identified their needs, challenges, difficulties, opportunities and strengths regarding territorial governance and food security.</p>	<p>Attendance list</p> <p>Audiovisual recording</p> <p>Pedagogical material produced during the workshop.</p>

		<p>- Strengthen the knowledge and capacities associated with the chagra as a sustainable productive system with its own knowledge through intergenerational dialogues of 48 indigenous women of the Uitoto people through a training cycle in each of the resguardos and cabildos participating in the project.</p>	<p>through a training cycle with a focus on the management of the chagra and governance from their own cultural vision, complemented with some appropriate concepts.</p> <p>A pedagogical product that visualises the different perceptions of the forest and the chagra as a forest management and use system from the perception of women with an intergenerational approach.</p>	
5	<p>A theoretical and practical workshop in each of the resguardos and the cabildo to address the importance and role of indigenous women in the chagra and to reconstruct the ancestral cultural memory through an intergenerational dialogue.</p>	<p>Strengthen the knowledge and capacities associated with the chagra as a sustainable productive system with its own knowledge through intergenerational dialogues of 48 indigenous women of the Uitoto people.</p>	<p>48 women from 4 communities strengthened their own knowledge and capacities around the value and importance of the chagra as a system of socio-cultural representations of the Uitoto indigenous people (symbol of fertility-women) and as a space where the word that comes out of the maloca materialises.</p>	<p>Attendance list</p> <p>Audiovisual recording</p> <p>Pedagogical material produced during the workshop.</p>

	and leadership of indigenous women in their territories of origin.	Guardianas de Semillas is made up of the participating women from each of the communities.	opportunities and strengths in terms of territorial governance and food security through a training cycle with a focus on the management of the chagra and governance from their own cultural vision, complemented with some appropriate concepts.	
	A participatory theoretical workshop to address gender gaps in territorial governance and food sovereignty through management of the chagra.	Strengthen the administrative, leadership, project management, governance and governability capacities of 48 indigenous women of the Uitoto people.	48 women from 4 communities have identified their needs, challenges, difficulties, opportunities and strengths in terms of territorial governance and food security through a training cycle with a focus on the management of the chagra and governance from their own cultural vision, complemented with some appropriate concepts.	Attendance List Audiovisual recording.
	Three days of work for the establishment of one (1) community chagra of ¼ ha (socola, tomb, seed collection and	Establish chagras in each of the communities as a space for the practice and application of knowledge.	Four chagras of 1/4 ha have been established in each of the communities, as a space for practice and	Land of ¼ ha ready for the construction of a collective chagra during

			<p>A pedagogical product visualising the different roles of women (past, present and future) in the chagra and the ecological calendar.</p>	
	<p>A day of seed exchange in each of the resguardos and the cabildo in order to highlight the importance of diversity and the safeguarding of native species, food security and the care of the chagra in relation to food sovereignty and biodiversity in the Colombian Amazon.</p>	<p>Strengthen the knowledge and capacities associated with the chagra as a sustainable productive system with its own knowledge through intergenerational dialogues of 48 indigenous women of the Uitoto people.</p>	<p>- Establish chagras in each of the communities as a space for the practice and application of the knowledge acquired, as well as for the generation of food and medicines that contribute to the food security of our indigenous peoples.</p> <p>- 48 women from 4 communities strengthened their own knowledge and skills around the value and importance of the chagra as a system of socio-cultural representations of the Uitoto indigenous people (symbol of fertility-woman) and as a space where the word that comes out of the maloca materialises.</p>	<p>Attendance List</p> <p>Audiovisual recording.</p> <p>Systematisation on the memories of the exchange of seeds</p>

	<p>A workshop to make visible the experiences of The life of indigenous women leaders and women from other cultures, on a national and international scale, in each of the resguardos and the cabildo, highlighting their work in the defence and care of the forest and the food sovereignty.</p>	<p>Strengthen the knowledge and capacities associated with the chagra as a sustainable productive system with its own knowledge through intergenerational dialogues of 48 indigenous women of the Uitoto people.</p>	<p>48 women from 4 communities recognise the importance of their leadership as chagra women and collectively build a pedagogical material that makes their own knowledge about the chagra visible, in order to facilitate the multiplication of what they have learned about alternative and sustainable uses of the forest, governance and project management with a woman's perspective, in each of their communities.</p>	<p>Attendance List</p> <p>Audiovisual recording.</p>
8	<p>A training day in each resguardo and cabildo to strengthen knowledge in project management, administrative processes and strategies from an indigenous, community and women's perspective.</p>	<p>Strengthen the administrative, leadership, project management, governance and governability capacities of 48 indigenous women of the Uitoto people.</p>	<p>48 women from 4 communities strengthened their own knowledge and administrative skills in leadership, project management and governance and governability from their own perspective and from a woman's point of view.</p>	<p>Attendance List</p> <p>Audiovisual recording.</p>
	<p>A participatory meeting (dialogue of knowledge) in each resguardo or cabildo to address organisational challenges, participation</p>	<p>Visibilise the role of indigenous women and their leadership through the creation of a Network of Chagrera Women and</p>	<p>48 women from 4 communities have identified their needs, challenges, difficulties,</p>	<p>Attendance List</p> <p>Audiovisual recording.</p>

	sowing) in each of the four communities that are part of the project to validate the knowledge learned, for a total of 15 chagra days in all the territories, which will take place in parallel to the training cycle.	and for the generation of food and medicines that contribute to the food security of our indigenous peoples.	application of the knowledge learned in the process, as well as for the generation of food and medicines.	the training cycle, in each of the three resguardos and the cabildo.
	Administrative and logistical meetings between the directors of ASCAINCA, the members and leaders of the Coordination of Women, Family and Children, and the other coordinations of the Association, for the planning and organisation of the Network of Chagrera Women and Seed Guardians.	Visibilise the role of indigenous women and their leadership through the creation of a Network of Chagrera Women and Seed Guardians.	A Network of Chagrera Women and Seed Guardians has been created to function as an instance of participation and articulation with the Coordination of Women, Family and Children and each of the indigenous communities of ASCAINCA.	Minutes of meetings Attendance lists Audiovisual record. Protocols of actions to be developed.
	A meeting between the 48 women from the 3 resguardos and 1 Uitoto cabildo for the inauguration of the Chagreras Women's Network and Seed Guardians, made up of the women participating in the training processes in each of the communities.	Visibilise the role of indigenous women and their leadership through the creation of a Network of Chagrera Women and Seed Guardians made up of the participating women from each of the communities.	A Network of Chagrera Women and Seed Guardians has been created to function as an instance of participation and articulation with the Coordination of Women, Family and Children and each of the indigenous communities of ASCAINCA.	Attendance lists Audiovisual recording Act of installation of the Network of Women Chagreras and Seed Guarantors Testimonies of the women participants on what they have learned

3. Codebook Interviews master dissertation

Name	Description	Files	References
Female Huitoto leadership		0	0
Challenges of female leadership		6	14
Coping strategy		1	1
Gender violence		1	1
Access to education		2	2
Machismo		6	11
violence		1	1
Inequality		0	0
Amount of women compared to amount of men		4	8
Financial inequality		1	2
Jealousy between leaders		1	1
Political complexity		1	1
Politics and tradition		2	3
Differences with male leadership		6	10
Huitoto women and nature		5	8
climate change		1	1
The territory		3	3

Name	Description	Files	References
Importance of female leadership		7	15
Inspiration		5	6
Motivations female leaders		8	19
Notion of female reinforcement		7	8
Political interests Huitoto women		3	8
Creating alliances		1	1
Gender equality		1	1
Guarantee of human rights		1	1
Individual vs collective needs		1	4
Protection of food sovereignty		1	1
Protection of the culture		1	7
Protection of the territory		6	10
Strategy of reinforcement female leadership		2	4
Access to education		4	6
OPIAC		4	7
Regular university		1	1
Alliances		4	6

Name	Description	Files	References
OPIAC		1	2
Proterra		2	6
Project las cultivadoras de la amazonia		1	3
Community reinforcement		3	4
Community support		1	1
Diversity of knowledge		4	4
Inspiration		1	1
Own economics		1	3
Support by men		1	1
Women spaces		1	1
Types of female leadership within the community		3	7
ASCAINCA Coordinator for women		1	1
Chagra		1	1
Coordinator human rights		1	3
El canasto		1	2
Environment promotor		1	2
Governor		4	4
What is a female leader		10	12

Name	Description	Files	References
Huitoto culture		0	0
Complementary between man and women		5	8
The rol of men		1	2
The rol of the women		3	4
Differences within the culture		5	5
Diversity of knowledge		2	2
Conflicts		2	2
Impact of colonization		6	10
Coping with displacement		2	2
Loss of culture		4	6
Coping with loss of culture		7	14
OPIAC		1	2
Indigenous youngsters		5	9
Challenges for young people		4	4
Reasons for leaving the community		1	1
Reason for moving to the city		5	6
Territorial threats		2	5
Traditional structures		0	0

Name	Description	Files	References
El mambadero		6	8
Hijos de la coca, el tabaco y la yuca dulce		1	1
La chagra		1	1
La maloka		3	5
La palabra dulce		5	7
Huitoto leadership		2	2
Appropriation of the west		2	2
Challenges		1	2
Elections		3	4
Level of leadership		2	2
International level		2	3
Local level		2	3
Social and political structure		2	2
1st circle el cacique		2	2
2nd circle Consejo Ancianos		1	2
3rd circle Administration		1	4
Internal conflicts		2	7

Name	Description	Files	References
La asamblea		1	1
national level		2	3
Regional level		0	0
ASCAINCA		5	5
OPIAC		3	5
Relationship Huitotos and the west		3	5
Appropriation of the west		1	1
Challenges		6	12
Personal encounters		1	3
Positive sides		6	13

4. Organisations representing Indigenous (Witoto) peoples

Zonal level:

ASCAINCA is an organisation that was born out of the need to represent the associated Uitoto Indigenous communities in processes of management, negotiation and agreement on plans, programmes, projects and activities before state institutions and NGOs, out of the need to demand the fulfilment of their fundamental rights as Indigenous people, as well as to prepare themselves individually and collectively to be autonomous in their own development, all of this in search of the benefit of the communities, seeking to strengthen the culture and the territory. The associated communities are 4 resguardos and 1 cabildo in the municipality of Solano: Manaye El Quince, Coropoya, Huitorá, Bajo Aguas Negras, and Ismuina, located in the basin of the Caquetá and Orteguzza rivers in the municipality of Solano, department of Caquetá, covering a total of 90,082 hectares (see Annex 1. Geographical location of ASCAINCA's resguardos). As part of the organisation's formation, the Coordination of Women, Family and Children was consolidated, seeking to strengthen the processes and rights of the Indigenous Uitoto women of ASCAINCA in an integral manner, as well as to give women direct participation and leadership in the organisation's various processes and projects. The main coordinator of the project will be Shary Letsy Jipa Garay, Coordinator of Women, Family and Children.

Decision-making:

Generally, an idea, proposal or own or external initiative is reported to the chairperson or coordinator of the area and then the general information is taken to the Maloca, or in another special space, after listening and asking questions about the subject, decisions are taken by consensus. Decision-making includes the board of directors, headed by the president, vice-president, secretary, treasurer, fiscal and area coordinators, as well as members of the community, depending on each of the issues to be decided. Women are part of this decision-making process, especially on issues associated with the Coordination of Women, Family and

Children, and on issues such as sovereignty and food security, among others.

Regional level:

The most important Indigenous organization working on regional level (but it is a governmental institution) is la Organización Nacional de los Pueblos Indígenas de la Amazonia Colombiana (OPIAC). OPIAC is a non-profit institution of public law with a special Indigenous character which exercises political representation of the IPs of the Colombian Amazon before national and international institutions; its main objective is to ensure that all collective and individual rights of its members are respected and recognized by all actors located in the region of the Colombian Amazon (OPIAC, 2022).

National level:

There are two main non-governmental organizations who represent IPs "Organización Nacional Indígena de Colombia" (ONIC) and "Autoridades Indígenas de Colombia" (AICO) (IWGIA, 2022). Within the government, there are social government bodies that also focus on the Indigenous population, such as 'Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar' (ICBF). Ninfa Herrera, a Witoto woman and one of my interviewees, works in this institution and focuses on the food sovereignty of IPs (Herrera. Personal communication. 02.04.2022). *El Movimiento Alternativo Indígena y Social*, or MAIS, is an Indigenous political party, born within the ONIC. Arelis Uriana, an Indigenous Wayúu woman who leads social processes at national and regional level from her resguardo Mayabangloma, is the first Indigenous woman in Colombia to run for president (MAIS, 2022).

On international level:

COICA (Coordinadora de las Organizaciones Indígena de la Cuenca Amazónica) represents the Indigenous peoples of 9 Amazonian countries. These include Perú, Brasil, Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador, Colombia, Suriname and French Guiana. The Colombian Indigenous Peoples of the Amazon are represented in this organisation by OPIAC (see above) (COICA,2022). The Huitora governor told me that she now works for COICA as a human rights coordinator. Virtual meetings are held where experiences are discussed, and translators are also present. In this way, they connect to the needs of other Indigenous groups and look for proper strategies of resistance.

5. Proterra Workshop: el 'cuerpo territorio'

The economic interest in the Amazon, which started in Caquetá with the rubber extract company, Casa Arana, had both then and now a great impact on the well-being of the Indigenous women and their resistance (Monaiyanhō, 2018). As mentioned earlier, the territory for these women is not only the physical habitat. The body itself is also a territory that was and in various ways still is subject to (neo)colonial forces. The body is represented by the territory and vice versa. Everything is connected and the distinction between nature and man is only culturally determined. How these women today see their bodies in relation to the territory was first explored during the interactive workshops of my internship at Proterra. As part of the project 'las cuidadoras de la amazonía', the relationship between women and the territory was portrayed through participatory workshops. This had already been done in practice through the creation of a communal chagra within the project 'las cuidadoras de la amazonía'. During my internship, I participated in the workshop on the relationship between women and water. Water takes many different forms in this territory: rivers, lagoons, waterfalls, lakes, springs, etc. The effect of these waters on the female body, both physically and spiritually, was represented by means of a drawing. These drawings were always made in small groups of women from different Witoto communities.

In the meantime, the drawings have been digitalised to be processed into a 'plan de manejo'. This plan aims to better manage the water in the territory. For example, the community helps to diagnose changes in the water and to pass this information on to stakeholders. It is also intended to give women a central role. By means of an infographic below, I share a result from one of the workshops around 'el cuerpo territorio'.

Desde el vientre, hacia el río: Cuerpos-agua, territorios de vida

Cuerpos-agua desde el vientre mismo. Fuente de vida, fuerza y sanación. Del agua venimos, y como el agua, van mutando nuestros pasos de mujer por los caminos del pensamiento, el corazón y el palabra.

Somos mujeres río; rápidas, fuertes y guardianas de nuestra cultura. Mujeres quebrada; pues corremos lento y vamos recogiendo a nuestro paso los conocimientos y las semillas para seguir fortaleciéndonos. Mujeres caño, bellas, transparentes, resistentes, de palabra dulce y fuerte.

Mujeres Murui con diversos ritmos, sueños, saberes y luchas. Lideresas incansables y guardianas de la vida.

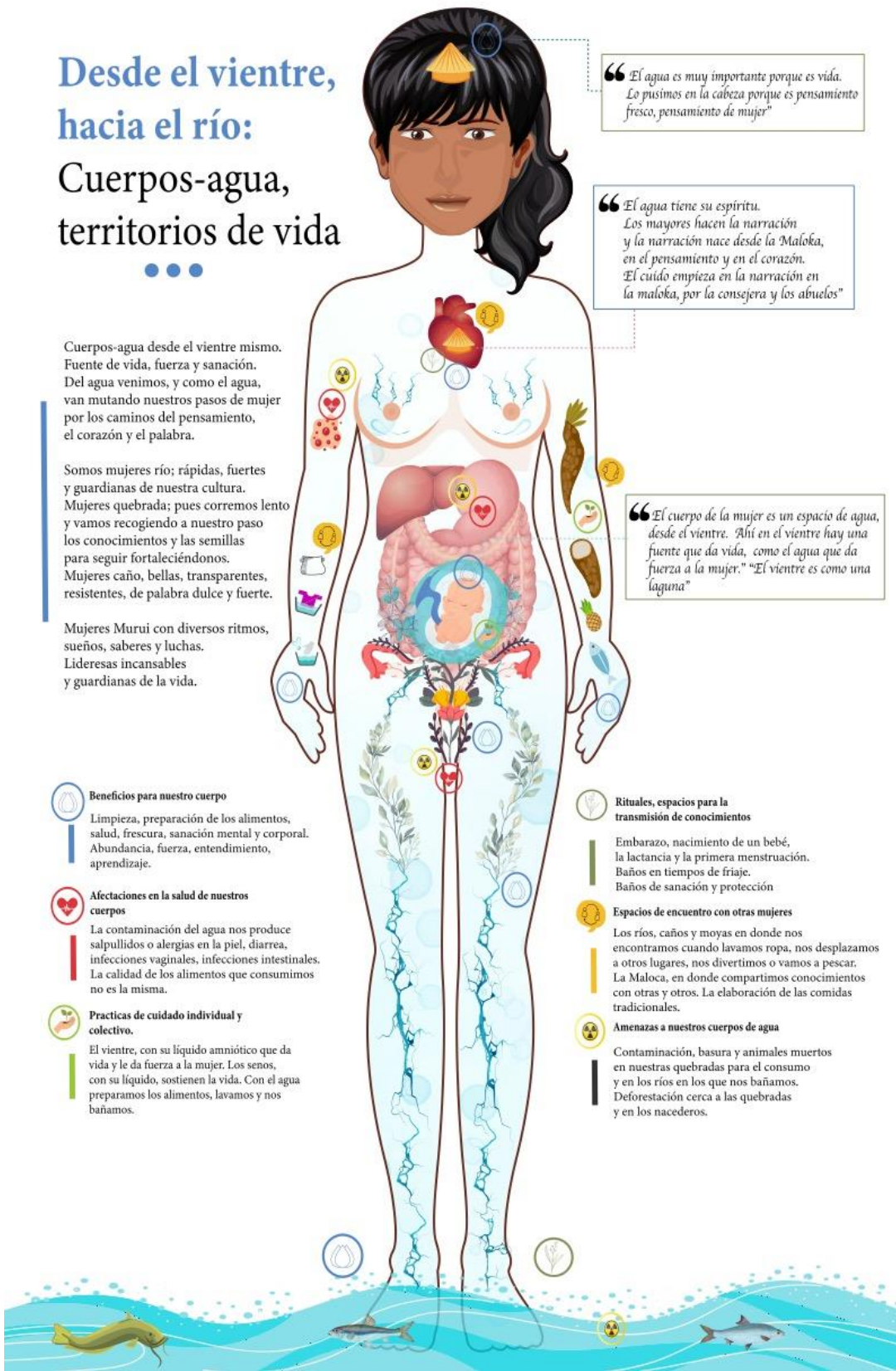
-  **Beneficios para nuestro cuerpo**
Limpieza, preparación de los alimentos, salud, frescura, sanación mental y corporal. Abundancia, fuerza, entendimiento, aprendizaje.
-  **Afectaciones en la salud de nuestros cuerpos**
La contaminación del agua nos produce salpullidos o alergias en la piel, diarrea, infecciones vaginales, infecciones intestinales. La calidad de los alimentos que consumimos no es la misma.
-  **Practicas de cuidado individual y colectivo.**
El vientre, con su líquido amniótico que da vida y le da fuerza a la mujer. Los senos, con su líquido, sostienen la vida. Con el agua preparamos los alimentos, lavamos y nos bañamos.

“El agua es muy importante porque es vida. Lo pusimos en la cabeza porque es pensamiento fresco, pensamiento de mujer”

“El agua tiene su espíritu. Los mayores hacen la narración y la narración nace desde la Maloka, en el pensamiento y en el corazón. El cuidado empieza en la narración en la maloka, por la consejera y los abuelos”

“El cuerpo de la mujer es un espacio de agua, desde el vientre. Ahí en el vientre hay una fuente que da vida, como el agua que da fuerza a la mujer.” “El vientre es como una laguna”

-  **Rituales, espacios para la transmisión de conocimientos**
Embarazo, nacimiento de un bebé, la lactancia y la primera menstruación. Baños en tiempos de friaje. Baños de sanación y protección
-  **Espacios de encuentro con otras mujeres**
Los ríos, caños y moyas en donde nos encontramos cuando lavamos ropa, nos desplazamos a otros lugares, nos divertimos o vamos a pescar. La Maloka, en donde compartimos conocimientos con otras y otros. La elaboración de las comidas tradicionales.
-  **Amenazas a nuestros cuerpos de agua**
Contaminación, basura y animales muertos en nuestras quebradas para el consumo y en los ríos en los que nos bañamos. Deforestación cerca a las quebradas y en los nacedores.



Bron: Proterra (2022)

The women explained how water has physical benefits on the one hand. It provides hygiene, health, refreshment, cultivation of food, physical strength and so on. On the other hand, it also provides mental strength, offers meaning, knowledge and is a symbol of abundance.

The water also has reproductive properties as it plays an important role during pregnancy and cultivation. Subsequently, some rituals take place in these waters, such as childbirth, but also during menstruation the woman washes herself in the water several times. So it is also a place where women come together to give emotional support, wash clothes together and so on.

The drawing also indicates the negative effects of water pollution. For example: deforestation, waste dumping, dead animals and so on, have a negative impact on the body. People spoke of skin rashes, allergies, diarrhea, vaginal infections and reduced quality of food.

Places in the female body can also symbolise water. For example, the third sentence on the right-hand side of the infographic illustrates a view of the uterus. The uterus is said to be like a lake because both give strength to life.

❖ Knowledge production

By bringing individual territory-body stories together in struggle and resistance, hope and collectivity are created. Together they create alternative stories of hope that allow for the exploration of coping strategies. The sense of one's own capacity for recovery is strengthened by discussing strengths and weaknesses (Colectivo Miradas Críticas del Territorio desde el Feminismo, 2017). By having participants draw the territory on the body, collective knowledge is created where the voices and experiences of participants are the foundation of the research process. This collective knowledge is produced in an accessible format for participants and the general public, facilitating a process of advocacy by the participants themselves (Zaragocin, & Caretta (2021).

This methodology is consistent with standpoint thinking. According to Sandra Harding (1987), viewpoint thinking is an important part of the feminist method. She argues for a stronger appreciation of qualitative research and interdisciplinarity. It has its roots in Marxist feminism

which takes into account the different experiences and perspectives due to the different positions in class society (Hartsock, 1997). Marx and Engels (1848) argued for a greater insider perspective, formulated by the working class. Thus, the feminist perspective seeks to take into account the most politically and economically vulnerable groups as much as possible by not just conducting research about them. The effects of the research on this target group must be taken into account as much as possible by, among other things, increasing the participation of the target group throughout the process (Harding, 2015). The methodology 'el cuerpo territorio' is therefore an appropriate way of allowing research participants to assist in data collection. Positionalism criticises the modern view of science and concepts such as objectivity, freedom of values and universalism. This is not to say that objectivity is not important. According to Harding (2015), we should strive for a science that is both epistemologically correct and socially just. Proterra uses this information to create awareness among stakeholders and create a management plan for and by communities.

6. List original citations in Spanish

1. “La mujer para mi es la fuente de vida, es el pilar fundamental de una sociedad, de una cultura en este caso, para que siga en el tiempo, si? Porque la mujer es quien da la vida, es quien cultiva esa vida o esa semilla, y no solamente en la parte de hijos si no que también cuida la semilla de vida, o sea de alimento, de conocimiento, porque la mujer es la que tiene esa primera relación con su hijo, y es ahí donde se va fundamentando todo un pueblo” (Ninfa Herrera. Personal Communication. 02.04.2022).
2. "La tierra, en general (...) es un espacio sagrado, un factor de unidad, un factor de autonomía, una fuente de alegría, salud y bienestar y un componente esencial de su historia (...) su relación con la tierra es la de un niño con su madre, revestida de respeto y amor. La tierra es nuestra madre sagrada, porque garantiza nuestra supervivencia; es donde vivieron nuestros ancestros y donde permanecemos nosotros. Es la esencia de nuestra existencia y sin ella no podemos hablar de ninguna cultura, porque de nuestra Madre Tierra viene toda la vida, por ella debemos amarla y respetarla" . (Gómez, 2007: 27).
3. “Para mi el territorio es un espacio donde nosotros como pueblos indígenas podemos tener variedades de cosas, generalmente como la salud, la comida y eso, pero también es un territorio donde... el territorio es vida, es amor, y es cultura. Digo yo, porque todos los pueblos indígenas vemos el territorio de formas distinta: nosotros los Huitoto a través de la coca, el tabaco y la yuca dulce, pues manejamos diferente a como manejan los demás; Para nosotros siempre va a ser muy importante, porque es la casa, la casa del pensamiento, la casa del conocimiento, la casa de todo lo que nosotros tenemos como pueblos indígenas: la comida, el hospital, y todo en general, pues sin ellos nosotros no seríamos nada” (Coordinator for women and family ASCAINCA. Personal communication. 26.03.2022).

4. “El territorio es un lugar donde que habitamos muchos indígenas, variedad... en Ismuina como tal, tenemos variedades indígenas, el territorio es algo que nos permite la identidad como indígenas, y también es la base fundamental para las familias porque en el territorio sembramos nuestra comida, nuestras medicinas, las frutas... y ahí también pues habitamos, es donde tomamos agua, donde nos beneficiamos del aire libre que tenemos acá, Eso es una diferencia, aunque estos pegados al pueblo es diferente porque al estar acá en la comunidad, aquí no nos pueden venir a obligar, haga esto, haga esto, pague este impuesto, no, nos dejan porque somos un territorio indígena que tenemos nuestras propias reglas.” (Environmental coordinator. Personal communication. 25.03.2022).
5. “La defensa del territorio lo es todo. Porque si nosotros como seres humanos hacemos parte de un territorio, tenemos que defenderlo, y en muchas veces también sentimos que el territorio nos defiende, porque somos parte de un territorio y nosotros... el territorio no hace parte nuestra, si no nosotros de un territorio, entonces pues para nosotros como pueblos indígenas creo que es fundamental el territorio porque es nuestra base de vida y de relación y de espiritualidad.” (Ninfa Herrera. Personal communication. 02.04.2022).
6. “Terminada la creación del mundo, el padre creador se preguntó, ¿dónde ubicaré esta criatura del tabaco, la coca y la yuca dulce?, él mismo se respondió: voy a dejarlo en el centro de la tierra, para que cuide la vida, la naturaleza, como el estantillo que cuida la puerta de la gran maloca que es el mundo” (AZI de cabildos, 2010).
7. “Todo aunque vamos acompañados de los hombres también, porque como indígena no puedo hablar solamente de la mujer, porque nosotros somos dualidad, somos complementariedad, pero no complementariedad para utilizarnos, si no para servirnos y salir Adelante.” (N. Herrera. Personal communication. 02.04.2022)
8. “En todas las comunidades es distinto, pero siempre es más notable que el hombre es el encargado como de mantener el hogar en cuestiones de economía, entonces el es el que

trabaja por el sustento de la familia, de traer la carne, la leña... todo para el hogar. Y la mujer, es mas de cuidar los hijos, de cocinar y de velar por la educación de los niños. Esos son como los dos roles que se ven en las comunidades indígenas. Entonces nosotras las encargadas de cuidar y enseñar a los hijos porque se dice que a través de nosotras también se empieza la transmisión de saberes de la cultura, entonces ahí también un rol importante.” (Coordinator ASCAINCA. Personal communication. 26.03.2022).

9. “La relación de la mujer con la naturaleza es muy con afinidad, porque primero la hacen de tejer, están en sus chagras a través de las semillas, la recolección de semillas, se integran con el bosque... cuando están sus alimentos también... Entonces, aunque no tienen la capacidad, aunque las mujeres indígenas no tienen la capacidad de conocer el territorio de una u otra manera, a través de la chagra y de sus semillas conocen parte de lo que es su territorio, ¿cierto?” (Coordinator ASCAINCA. Personal communication. 26.03.2022).

10. *“Entonces, cuando hablamos que a la mujer es la palabra dulce es porque ella es la complementariedad del hombre entonces ella esta ahí para endulzar el corazón del hombre. Cuando algo al hombre le sale mal ella esta ahí para darle esa paila la tranquilidad que necesita. Y ya en los eventos así siempre... la mujer no va al mambeadero, solo va el hombre, pero la mujer esta representada ahí en la caguama, entonces la mujer hace la caguama y la deja ahí y el hombre la consume así que ahí esta representada la mujer.”* (Governor Resguardo Huitora. Personal communication. 19.03.2022).

11. “Para mi una lideresa... hay muchos lideres, hay muchos tipos de liderazgo y que entre las comunidades uno ve reflejada que así no este acá hablándole a la gente, esta liderando desde otros espacios, desde la cocina, desde su tejido, desde la chagra... entonces ser lideresa es ser una persona que de una u otra manera recoge como las problemáticas que tienen dentro de su mismo espacio. Es decir, si en la cocina me esta fallando algo voy a tratar de acomodarlo. Si en el tejido algo me esta quedando mal ella trata de solucionarlo. Entonces tenemos muchos roles o liderazgo de entro las mismas comunidades, que de pronto no tienen un potencial como los que están por acá pero si

están ejerciendo liderazgo en las comunidades, están bien. Que de pronto no se ve, por lo que le decía, que hay algunas que son violentadas, que son maltratadas... pero generalmente en sus familias, siguen trabajando por mantener un hogar, por darles habilidad a una familia, y ahí también están ejerciendo el liderazgo. Oprimidas, pero ejerciendo el liderazgo (risas).” (Coordinator ASCAINCA. Personal communication. 26.03.2022).

12. “Para mi una lideresa es, primero, es una mujer, una mujer que puede ser una madre, hija, esposa, nieta, una mujer que Dios le dio esa capacidad para ella dirigirla tanto el pueblo como la familia, sus amigos, todos lo que le concierne a ella en ella ,no tanto como decir yo represento esta comunidad sino en como la puedo apoyar, como yo puedo interactuar con la gente, porque muchas veces, a veces, el líder es el que maneja, el líder es el que dice esto se hace..., no, un líder debe escuchar mucho las necesidades de su comunidad y representar y buscar acciones de cuando una comunidad tiene una problemática ella es la que busca acciones de como mitigar un daño que se este haciendo a la comunidad, por ejemplo en caso de mi comunidad se esta perdiendo la lengua materna entonces una persona como líder debe buscar y proyecciones y que vengan a buscar el rescate de esa lengua madre.” (Governor Resguardo Huitora. Personal communication. 19.03.2022).
13. “Entonces ella vino acá a territorio, y yo empecé a leer sobre ella y a averiguar sobre ella. Y yo dije algún día tendré que ser como ella, y ella me inspira a trabajar con la gente. Mire hay aquí en territorio, las mujeres están pudiendo estudiar la educación que va de 6 a 11 por medio de una beca que ella les ha otorgado a las compañeras. Entonces me inspira a ser una mujer así valiente como ella y que trabaja por su pueblo.” (Governor Resguardo Huitora. Personal communication. 19.03.2022).
14. “Aquí en Ismuina como que ya nosotros hemos cambiado ese modo de... porque si una mujer le toco que salir.. pues le toco, se fue, y el marido le toca quedar, y si uno no tiene marido o algo, pues un familiar se encarga de los hijos y todo. Aquí en Ismuina ya hemos tomado esa igualdad, porque hemos tenido muchas visitas y de pronto la

información llega, porque estamos aquí en la cabecera municipal.” (Environmental coordinator. Personal communication. 25.03.2022).

15. “La mujer para mí es la fuente de vida, es el pilar fundamental de una sociedad, de una cultura en este caso, para que siga en el tiempo, si? Porque la mujer es quien da la vida, es quien cultiva esa vida o esa semilla, y no solamente en la parte de hijos si no que también cuida la semilla de vida, o sea de alimento, de conocimiento, porque la mujer es la que tiene esa primera relación con su hijo, y es ahí donde se va fundamentando todo un pueblo” (Ninfa Herrera. Personal communication. 02.04.2022).
16. “La defensa de la madre tierra es cuidarla, es cuidarla porque en ella es la vida de nosotros. Si ella esta desequilibrada es cuando vienen las tormentas, vienen las inundaciones. La deforestación no esta bien ante los ojos del grupo indígena. ¿Por qué? Porque a nosotros nos criaron bajo (..) la ley natural, que nosotros tenemos que interactuar con ese mundo porque en el mundo ahora estamos nosotros aquí, pero en las montañas hay espiritual que están cuidando la tierra, que están cuidando las montañas” (Governor resguarde Huitora. Personal communication. 19.03.2022).
17. “En el indígena hay muchas cosas que se han perdido porque el indígena no escribe, el indígena usted nunca lo va a ver digitalizar (...) aunque si un líder es que venia luchando desde su territorio se ha muerto, y todo eso acabo por que los compromisos que se haciendo directo no eran escritos ni firmados. Ahí se acabo.” (Environmental coordinator. Personal communication. 25.03.2022).
18. “Y muchas mujeres han sufrido, por ejemplo, ella mi tía, ella tiene 8 hijos, y el esposo no la deja asumir un cargo o ir a las entidades o las reuniones, Yo si soy muy consciente de que la tribu donde esta mi tía es muy machista (...) Allí en la comunidad de ellos las mujeres no salen, hay latas mujeres, pero no salen, porque el marido no les deja, y si se salen les dicen que no vuelva, que “váyase y no vuelva”, porque usted es una mujer, usted es de la casa usted no tiene derecho a salir, ni a una reunión ni a nada” (Environmental promotor. Personal communication. 25.03.2022).

19. “Para mi el fortalecimiento de la mujer ... es como una pared o una barrera donde la mujer empieza a empoderarse, a creerse que ella es importante, a verse que en los espacios de participación si es tenida en cuenta la palabra de ella y no es como lo pintan las palabras de que ella no cuentan o la palabra de ella no vale, si no que ella debe creerse ese papel de que ella es importante (...). Eso para mi es el fortalecimiento de una mujer.” (Ascaınca coordinator for women, family and kids. Personal communication. 26.03.2022).
20. “(...) podemos decirte que a medida que va avanzando todo ese proceso hay algunas mujeres, no todas las mujeres, veían esa necesidad de vender los productos artesanales como forma de fortalecer la economía propia de cada familia porque teniendo en cuenta de que estamos cerca del casco urbano, eso hace que se vea la necesidad de vender nuestros productos. Y fuera de eso, la chagra no tenemos pues bastante territorio para sembrar todo las diferentes especies nativas que nosotros tenemos entonces eso hace que la soberanía alimentaria baje, y eso nosotros éramos dificultades que teníamos, y pues canasto esta fortaleciendo esa economía propia de varias familias artesanas y por medio de eso pues también fortaleciendo la cultura de nosotros, porque nosotros nunca alejamos la cultura propia de nosotros porque eso hace parte de nuestra vivencia como pueblo indígena. (...) Entonces esa una forma de nosotras colectivas de también organizarnos, expresar lo que nosotros necesitamos y así mismo buscarles solución a esas necesidades. Entonces esta organización ha buscado todas esas posibilidades para seguirnos fortaleciendo y generar confianza entre todas nosotras porque aquí no solamente hablamos de mujeres, sino que también nosotros hacemos que hagan parte integral los hombres también porque todos somos integrales en nuestro pueblo indígena, nosotros nunca decimos solamente es un genero, si no que todo es de manera integral. (...) Pero así mismo también nosotros hemos buscado la forma de sostenernos, preservar, conservar nuestra cultura propia pero así mismo mirar cual es la importancia del rol de la mujer indígena que juega dentro de nuestras comunidades.” (Canasto women. Personal communication. 24.03.2022).

21. *“Ya nos hemos reunido, que, si alguna quiere ser líder, apoyarla. Por ejemplo, tenemos un comité de mujeres donde mi prima, ella es la que es líder allá. Entonces, la apoyamos. Usted va a ser la líder, necesitamos hacer esto entre mujeres, usted lo organiza y nosotros le apoyamos. Igual esta con canasto, ellos tienen una asociación que la que dirige le hace eso y le apoyan. Igual a veces nosotros pues le apoyamos, y ellos nos apoyan. Como estamos en diferentes proyectos, nosotros en chagra y ellas en artesanías. Si ellas necesitan el apoyo, obvio nosotros le apoyamos, necesitamos eso, si... Ya eso se esta haciendo mucho, porque antes no era así, antes era cada uno por lo suyo, si yo te dejo, usted deja... Ahora no, ahora tenemos mucha mas conexión, mas organizada, estamos superando todo eso. Aquí en Ismuina pues hemos estado trabajado así”* (Environmental promotor. Personal communication. 25.03.2022).